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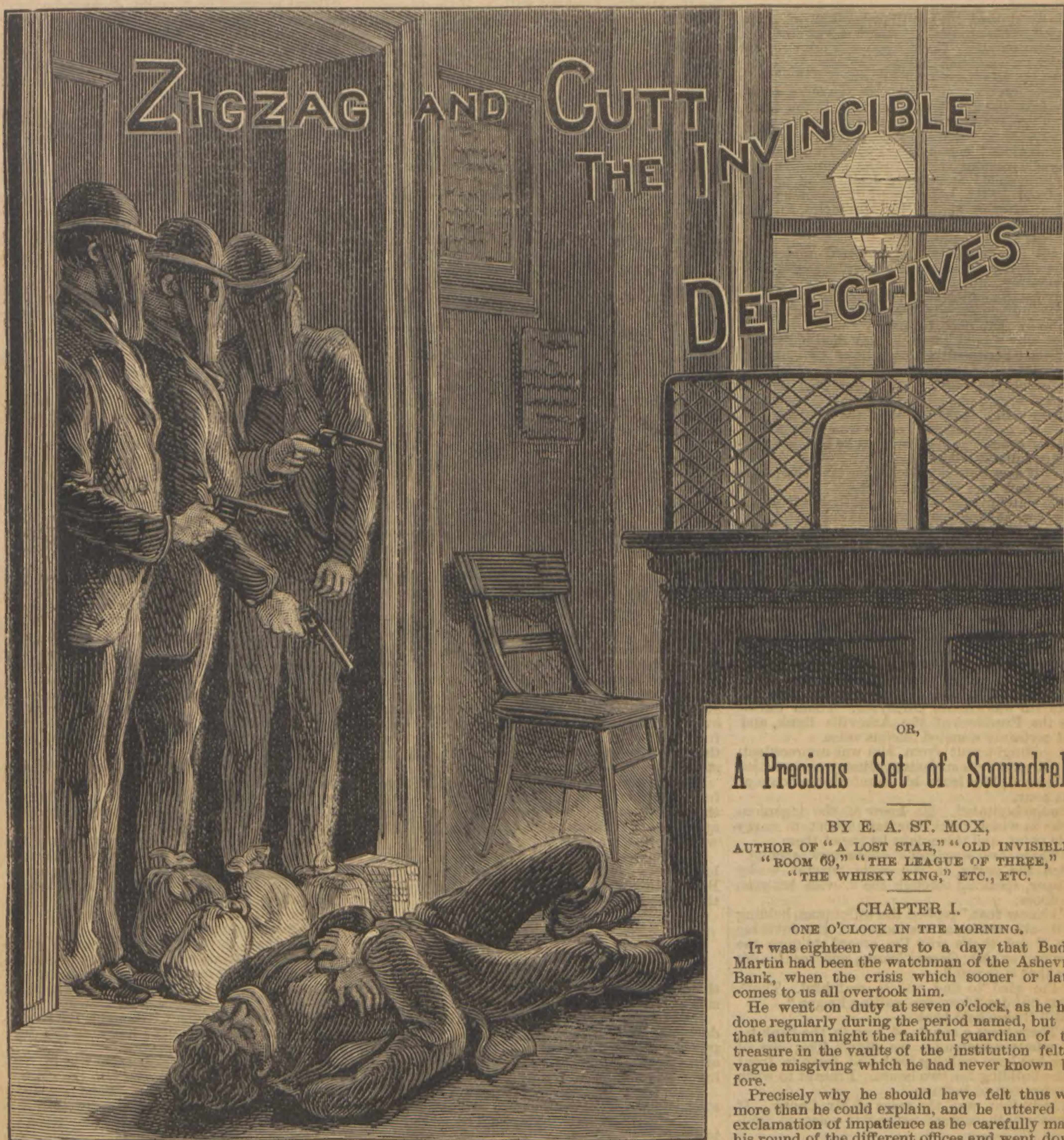
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EACH OF THE BURGLARS SILENTLY DEPOSITED HIS SPOILS OF WEALTH ON THE FLOOR AND DREW HIS REVOLVER. THEY WERE LIKE WILDCATS CAUGHT AT BAY.

OR,
A Precious Set of Scoundrels.

BY E. A. ST. MOX,
AUTHOR OF "A LOST STAR," "OLD INVISIBLE,"
"ROOM 69," "THE LEAGUE OF THREE,"
"THE WHISKY KING," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ONE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING.

It was eighteen years to a day that Budge Martin had been the watchman of the Asheville Bank, when the crisis which sooner or later comes to us all overtook him.

He went on duty at seven o'clock, as he had done regularly during the period named, but on that autumn night the faithful guardian of the treasure in the vaults of the institution felt a vague misgiving which he had never known before.

Precisely why he should have felt thus was more than he could explain, and he uttered an exclamation of impatience as he carefully made his round of the different offices and went down into the massive vault where the gold, silver and greenbacks were locked within the iron walls

which seemed strong enough to resist the attack of an army.

There was absolutely nothing that he could discover on which to base the slightest suspicion that anything was wrong.

"Bah! what's the matter with me?" he demanded, after adjusting the register, as he was obliged to do every fifteen minutes to prove to his employers that he had not slept on his post. "I feel as if I were going to have a chill—"

Hark! what was that?

Only the clock in the Town Hall booming the hour of midnight, just as he had heard it boom the hours for nearly a score of years.

But something caused the sturdy watchman, who at that moment was walking softly through the open space in front of the counter, to stop and listen.

He heard nothing except the footstep of some one passing over the pavement on the outside.

Surely there was no cause for suspicion, but, somehow or other, the conviction fastened itself on the mind of Budge that the same person had walked in front of the bank at least twice within the preceding hour.

Even if such were the fact, he argued that it did not signify anything. The individual, who ever he was, might be strolling along and smoking a late cigar, with never a thought of the bank and its wealth of treasure. He might be waiting for some belated friend, or indeed, there might be a dozen legitimate reasons for being on the street at that late hour.

At any rate, there was no fear of the watchman falling asleep on his post, as he was obliged to admit to himself he had done more than once in the past.

He examined his Smith & Wesson which he carried in his hip-pocket, where it was ready at an instant's call. The weapon was prepared for service on a second's notice.

The gas jets were turned down, but they were burning on the upper floor, in the office of the president, the directors' room, and in the vault, which was reached by a descent of three steps.

Everything was ship-shape. The handsome clock against the wall ticked with its usual monotonous regularity, but in the oppressive stillness it sounded startlingly loud. The light in the front of the bank was strong enough for Budge, after adjusting his spectacles, to read the figures on the white face.

It was five minutes to one.

"I'll be hanged!" he muttered under his breath, "if that ain't that same chap ag'in!"

Certainly some one was walking slowly and softly by the outer door; the footstep sounded precisely like that which had arrested his attention more than once before.

But why should there be any distinguishable difference between the footfalls of two persons sauntering over the pavement late at night?

It would be hard to say, but Martin had reached a state of such extreme nervousness that nothing could shake his belief that a single person from some cause or other was parading in front of the Asheville Bank, as he had been doing for fully two hours.

"If it does him any good, he is welcome to tramp back and forth all night—"

The watchman sprung several inches from the floor, for, at that moment, some one rattled the knob of the outer door, following it with a quick, peremptory rap, repeated several times.

Recovering himself instantly, Budge placed his right hand on the butt of his revolver, and stepping forward, demanded:

"Who's there?"

"Is that you, Budge?" asked the party outside, holding his mouth close to the crevice between the halves of the door.

"Of course it is. Who are you?"

"Mr. Carew. There's something wrong; let me in, quick!"

Martin was almost paralyzed. Tudor Carew was the President of the Asheville Bank, and that certainly sounded like his voice.

A midnight visit from him was unprecedented. It must be some extraordinary cause which could bring him from his comfortable home at that hour.

Budge hesitated. He knew of the ingenious tricks to which bank burglars resort to carry their point, and this might be one of them.

"There are suspicious characters around," added the party, in the same hurried, husky whisper, speaking through the crevice between the doors.

"I know that," replied the watchman, holding his mouth within a few inches of the invisible face, "and that's why I'm afraid to open the door to you, Mr. Carew, 'cause, you see I ain't sure that it is you."

"I'm glad to find you so watchful. That's right, but don't keep me waiting longer."

Still Budge held back.

"There were a couple of men in the bank to-day whose appearance we didn't like; one of them has been walking back and forth in front of the building for two hours. I meant to warn you, but forgot to do so."

Surely that was the voice of Mr. Carew. If it was not, there were never two voices so similar.

But the situation of the watchman compelled him to be unusually careful, and with his hand

on the ponderous fastenings of the outer doors, he hesitated, doubtful and anxious.

"If you are uncertain," added the man outside, with a low, chuckling laugh, which the watchman had never heard fall from any lips except those of the president, "you can tell me how *Dit-Dat-Dot* is coming along this fine autumn evening."

Budge Martin was the father of a three-year-old boy who was always addressed as *Dit-Dat-Dot* by only one person in the world, and that person was Tudor Carew, the President of the Asheville Bank.

The form of address, accompanied by the well-remembered voice, and the peculiar, indescribable chuckling laugh scattered the last remaining doubt from the mind of the watchman.

A feeling like that of remorse took possession of him because he had kept the honored head of the institution waiting so long. He therefore undid the fastenings, saying:

"I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. Carew, but, you know in these times a person can't be too careful—"

A million stars suddenly burst to view in Budge Martin's field of vision and he felt as if a torpedo had exploded against the center of his forehead.

As he tumbled backward, as limp as a rag, the supposed Mr. Carew leaped lightly over him, followed by two other men, each with his face masked!

Turning about, the leader fastened the door, while the others bent over the prostrate form of the watchman.

"I guess he's done for," remarked one, surveying the bleeding forehead with as little concern as if it had been a block of wood; "you fetched him a good one, Ash!"

"We ain't taking any chances," replied the leader, who, having quickly refastened the door, joined the two who were bending over the desperately wounded watchman, "he's tough and is liable to come to, any moment, and let out a yell which will wake the town."

From an inside pocket of his coat, the speaker drew a gag, which was crammed into the mouth of poor Budge, and fastened in a knot behind his head, so as to keep it in place.

That the trio were adepts in crime was proven by the dexterity with which one tied the wrists together, while the other bound the ankles as securely as Geronimo and his Apaches could have done in preparing a prisoner for torture.

Three minutes after the entrance of the burglars, the watchman was as helpless on the floor as if the bank building had fallen upon him.

It was true that Budge had received a fearful blow, but it was equally true that, as the leader had declared, he was an exceedingly tough individual. Although his skull seemed to have been cracked and he was so dizzy and bewildered that he would not have been able to keep his feet, had he been allowed to try it, he quickly regained his senses to that extent that he understood what was going on around him.

Unable to stir or speak, he could use his eyes, despite the blood that was trickling down his forehead and face.

That which he saw was astounding.

Budge did not entirely open his eyes, through fear that it would bring another frightful visitation from the club which the leader had used upon him, and which lay on the floor by his side.

With the lashes half-closed, he was able to see the burglars as long as they were within his field of vision.

The men had no dark-lanterns and none of the paraphernalia with which the knights of the jimmy are accustomed to do their work. Had the trio been encountered on the street, there would not have been anything (harring their black masks) that would have drawn the least attention to them. All three were well and even fashionably dressed, one of them being fully six feet in height, while the other two (and this included the leader) were of ordinary stature.

Having disposed of the watchman, all stood for a minute or two in a careless attitude, with their hands in their coat pockets, as if they had any number of hours at their disposal and there was no cause for hurry.

Standing thus, they talked a few minutes in low tones, every word being audible to poor Budge Martin, who listened and looked with all the power at his command.

CHAPTER II.

A DARING DEED.

THE three burglars stood close to the door, so that no one of them could be seen from the outside.

Had they been in line with either of the windows, they would have been visible to any one passing along the street, for the curtains were always raised at night, so that the dimly burning gas brought the interior into view.

Their action showed that they were awaiting some signal from a confederate without.

"The job was well managed," remarked the tall man.

"So far all is well."

"And there's no reason why it shouldn't be to

the end, Fred," remarked one of the others, apparently addressing the man at his side, whose stature was the same as his own.

"Budge is a pretty good watchman, but, like all of them, he is likely to make a slip."

At this, all three turned their gaze upon the prostrate man, who held his eyelids so nearly closed that for the moment he saw nothing of the dreaded figures.

At that moment, a soft, tremulous whistle was heard out-doors.

It meant that the coast was clear.

The tallest of the men, moved nimbly around from the front of the counter to its side, reached his hand behind the network of wire which covered it throughout its extent, unfastened a door, and, placing his hand on the counter vaulted lightly over.

The other two followed him like sheep going over a wall, and all three instantly vanished from the sight of the watchman, who suffering as he was from his wound, smiled to himself.

"It isn't hard to get in this door," he thought, "but it will take a smarter gang than them to break into that vault."

In the profound stillness of the room, Budge's sense of hearing was preternaturally acute. Could he believe his senses? He heard them fumbling at the massive door, and then one of them chuckled.

The ponderous structure moved almost noiselessly on its complicated hinges, but, there could be no mistake about it. The watchman heard it swing back, just as distinctly as he ever heard the door of his own bedroom move to and fro!

"Great heaven!" he thought; "can it be they have the combination? Impossible! that is known only to the president and cashier!"

But, hark again!

"The word is '*L-o-a-d*,' said one in an undertone, which reached the ears of the amazed Budge Martin, "here she goes!"

As sure as fate, the inner door of the vault was swung outward, in obedience to the strong hand that had grasped the knob and turned it back and forth, so that the key spelled the word named.

A slight increase of the glow within the center of the bank showed that the criminals had turned up the gas jet in the vault, so as to give all the light they needed.

This expansion of the glare was not likely to attract attention from the outside; but the same soft whistle from the pavement reached the daring workers in the vault.

There must have been a slight variation in the sound, for, instantly, the light was turned down again, and all was as still as the tomb. The sound of a hurried footstep proved that the signal was intended as a warning.

Half a minute after the footsteps had died out, another faint whistle was heard.

Instantly, the whispers were renewed inside the vault, the gas jet was turned up, and work was resumed.

The cold perspiration broke out all over poor Budge. He felt that the Asheville Bank was being cleaned out by a gang of professional burglars, and that it was due solely to his own remissness. True, an unprejudiced investigation would acquit him of blame, but his own conscience could never do so, nor could he be certain that his employers would hold him guiltless.

The man who personated Tudor Carew, the president, did so with a skill which would have deceived his own wife, but, what person or corporation will accept any excuse for the loss of a vast amount of money, through the agency of an individual?

The watchman hoped against hope that he was mistaken; it must be some awful dream, he thought again and again; but, the racking pain of that wound on his forehead, the trickling blood, the suffocating gag in his mouth, the cutting thongs on wrists and ankles—ah! they were no dreams.

"How did they get the combination?" Budge repeatedly asked himself; "they must have gone to the house of Mr. Carew or Hyneman and made them tell. Maybe, they murdered both of them; who knows?"

A dull, muffled clink came from within the vault. Martin recognized the sound; it was that made by setting the little bags of gold on the floor or striking them against each other.

Ay, there could be no doubt of it! The burglars had opened the treasure vault and were helping themselves.

Would they leave anything? Surely three men were not strong enough to carry off all the treasures but they could take away enough in the form of bank bills and gold to make them wealthy for life.

"And it is all *my* fault," thought the watchman in agony of spirit; "if I had done my duty this never would have happened."

'Sh! there was a movement from within. The burglars were about to emerge from the vault.

Suddenly the head of the tallest appeared through the grating, which ran around the counter, and then the tops of the hats worn by the other two were seen beside him. They were not talking, but stood a moment and listened. They were in sight of any one passing along on

the outside and evidently were waiting for a signal from their confederate.

The absence of such signal was a good omen, and once more the tall man vaulted like a monkey over the counter, followed less nimbly by his associates.

As they came in sight, the horrified watchman saw they were loaded with riches. Bills of large denominations were packed close together and held under the arms of the two foremost, whose pockets were bulging out with the same valuable stuff.

The third man had devoted his attention to the auriferous deposits of the Asheville Bank. He certainly was more than half a hundred pounds heavier when he came out of than when he entered the institution and he walked like a man in the last stage of exhaustion. He was forced to deposit it all on the counter before he could climb over, his companions indulging in a light laugh at the figure he cut. But he quickly joined them as pleased as they.

Almost opposite Budge whose eyes were nearly shut, and whose heart was beating like a triphammer one of the canvas bags slipped from under his arm and striking the knee of the watchman, fell upon the floor with a dull, metallic thud.

"Confound it!" growled the burglar, stooping over with some difficulty to pick it up.

The scamp was so laden with gold that two other bags slipped from his grasp and came down upon the stomach of Budge Martin.

That sort of metal, as is well known, is one of the heaviest in the world and the blows forced a groan from the watchman.

"The fellow is alive, Fred," said the tallest; "I thought that blow of mine finished him."

"If it didn't a few more of mine will," muttered the other, managing with some difficulty to gather up his pack again.

At this juncture, the robbers received the first scare of the evening. They had laid their plot well and executed it with a dash and audacity which carried them through where every one else would have failed.

Some one walked rapidly by the door of the bank and coughed a couple of times. It was the confederate who saw such imminent danger that he dared not use his usual signal, lest that of itself should attract suspicion.

The three stood close against the door, beyond sight of any one outside and coolly awaited the crisis.

All at once, the murmur of voices was heard and two men stepped upon the marble steps, leading to the bank.

What could it mean?

Each of the burglars silently deposited his spoils of wealth on the floor and drew his revolver.

They were like wildcats caught at bay; they did not seek human life, but, when driven into a corner would fight to the death.

Although it was so still within the bank, and the men outside did not seem to try to muffle their voices, it was impossible to distinguish a sentence uttered by them.

Suddenly one of them grasped the door-knob, and rattled it vigorously.

Discovery seemed inevitable, but the law-breakers were prepared.

"Hello, Budge; open the door!" spoke one of the men, whose voice was recognized as that of Barton Hyneman, the cashier.

The latter called to him repeatedly, but of course received no response.

How the poor fellow on the floor prayed that they would persevere and force an entrance! Ah! if they only knew the situation, how quickly they would summon help!

"That fellow is asleep again," finally said the companion of the cashier, in a voice plainly audible within the bank.

"Yes; he's becoming so careless," added the official, "that we shall have to ship him. I'll let the directors know about it to-morrow."

And with that they sauntered off, never dreaming of the fearful condition of affairs.

Once more the criminals gathered up their treasures and carefully stowed them about their persons.

Then the tallest stood with his hands on the fastenings of the door, awaiting the signal from their confederate.

It came within the next five minutes.

The pal walked slowly this time, and whistled a bar from the "Mikado," expressive of his jollity of spirits.

It was enough; the door was drawn inward, and the trio passed outside, closing the door after them. The half-dead watchman heard their footsteps until they died out in the distance.

And as the three burglars and their confederate vanished in the night, they carried with them a cool two hundred thousand dollars belonging to the Asheville Bank.

CHAPTER III.

"LOVERS BETROTHED WERE THEY."

WILD as was the excitement caused in Asheville by the wholesale robbery of its bank, the consternation scarcely touched that caused by another event ten-fold more startling and daring.

By a wonderful coincidence the second took place at precisely the same hour as did the first.

This led many to believe that a single audacious band of criminals were the authors of both, though there were not wanting those who insisted that the outrages were independent of each other, and the fact that they were contemporaneous had no significance.

Asheville was an agricultural town of four or five thousand inhabitants, including among its citizens a number of considerable wealth, who made their homes in the pleasant and healthful town, while their principal business was in the city of New York, which was hardly an hour's ride distant by rail.

One of the finest mansions in Asheville was on the southern suburbs and was known as Ravenswood. It was the home of Leon Walsingham, a widower with two daughters, Amy and Ada. The father was a well-known and wealthy banker in New York, so liberal and charitable that he was one of the most popular citizens of Asheville.

His wife had been buried so long that it had come to be a general belief that he would never marry again.

Indeed, his whole love was infolded in his charming daughters, who were well worthy of such a proud father's affection.

It so happened that, on the eventful night of which we are speaking, Ada, the younger daughter, attained her sixteenth birthday and her father gave her a party for which preparations had been going on for weeks.

It was the grandest occasion of the kind ever known in Asheville, for there was no earthly reason why it should not be such. Wealth, liberality and exquisite taste formed the chief elements for which worldly happiness can sigh.

This is not the place nor time to describe that grand entertainment which is spoken of to-day with pride and delight by all who were fortunate enough to be present—and it did seem as if all Asheville was there.

The beautiful grounds, filled to overflowing with the rarest and richest of tropical plants, were illuminated, as if by the noonday sun; strains of ravishing music intoxicated the senses; the gay dancers as they whirled through the bewildering waltzes were like the dream of the houris; the earth, the air, and the sea were laid under tribute to bring to Ravenswood all that was choice and beautiful and lovely; the magnificent premises, the vast halls and rooms, the summer-houses, the stretches of shrubbery and flowers and vegetation were bathed in perfume so sweet, so subtle and bewildering in its power to steal away the senses, that one had but to shut his eyes to feel that he was in the land of Araby the blest.

It would be a delightful task to dwell upon this scene, which must have stirred the heart of an ascetic; but, the strange story we have set out to tell moves with a step that will not allow us to hold the rose too long nor sip too often of the delicious wine.

Amy and Ada Walsingham, as we have said, were well worthy of the love of their father, who received endless congratulations that, though gushing in some instances, were nevertheless honest and sincere.

Among so many fair women and brave men there were others who would have attracted admiration anywhere.

Perhaps the most intimate friend of the Walsinghams was Gladys Linden, who was of the age of Amy, being eighteen years. She was undoubtedly the most admired young lady in Asheville, for it cannot be denied that she was the most beautiful and captivating.

Gladys was modest, brilliant of intellect and a devoted worker in the church. "Slumming" with her was a work of love, and there was not a poor family in the town that would not have taken it as a personal sorrow had she been withdrawn from them.

When it is added that Gladys had no brothers or sisters nor any parents, but held an independent fortune in her own right, it need not be added that she possessed no end of admirers.

Gladys was the ward of Tudor Carew, her uncle and President of the Asheville Bank. With less wealth and liberality than his friend Mr. Walsingham, Mr. Carew was looked upon as one of the most opulent and respected citizens of the town. He had been an official in the leading church for years and was considered a type of the honorable, upright business man who is beyond the reach of temptation, at least in a monetary point of view.

It had been the intention of Mr. Carew to accompany his ward to the birthday party of Ada Walsingham, but, late in the afternoon, he was seized with one of his periodical attacks of vertigo and found himself unable to go. Gladys offered to stay at home with him, but since his wife would give him all the attention he could need, he would not hear of it and withdrew to his own room.

So it came about that the beautiful Gladys was escorted by Fred Melville, the chief bookkeeper in the Asheville Bank.

Who can blame him if he did hold his head a little higher than usual and probably thrust out his chest more than ordinary, when he entered

the land of enchantment with the bewitching heiress leaning on his arm?

There wasn't a man there who viewed the couple without jealousy and Fred knew it and was proud of it.

And among all the envious ones there was none who did not mentally add the declaration that the two were by all odds the handsomest couple on the grounds.

There were many natural and not very kind remarks about such an attractive and desirable lady as Gladys Linden showing so marked preference for Fred Melville, when so many more desirable young gentlemen were at her command.

True, Fred was handsome, talented, and possessed good principles. He was a leading singer in the choir of the church in which Gladys was so prominent a worker, and an adept in all the arts and accomplishments that tend to make one popular in society.

But, all the same, he was only a bookkeeper in the Asheville Bank, and his living depended upon the not very generous salary he received for such services.

Enough has been told to show that Fred and Gladys were extremely fond of each other, and what need they care, therefore, for what envious ones thought and said?

In the maze and whirl and splendor of that memorable evening at Ravenswood, Fred and Gladys gained few opportunities for the exchange of those delicious little nothings which mean everything to lovers, but are so pointless to the outside world; but there had been several warm pressures of the hand on the way thither in the carriage; the lips had met in quick, warm, thrilling contact, and the eyes, when seen under the glare in the grounds were tremulous with the light of love.

Although jealous of the attentions of others, they trusted each other fully, and felt that so long as they had not publicly announced their betrothal, they could not shut their eyes to the demands of society.

So it came about that Fred was obliged to guide Amy and Ada Walsingham through the bewitching mazes of the waltz, and with a certain pang as he saw the arm of another encircling the waist of her who was all the world to him.

Glancing at Gladys, as she whirled across the rooms, with just the faintest glimpse of the bewitching slippers which would have graced the foot of Cinderella herself, he could not help murmuring:

"What! the girl I adore by another embraced?
What! the balm of those lips shall another man taste?
What! touched in the twirl by another man's knee?
What! pant and recline on another than me?
Sir, she's yours! From the grape you have pressed the soft blue;
From the rose you have shaken the tremulous dew;
What you've touched, you may take; pretty waltzer, adieu!"

But the ardent lover did not appropriate the full sentiment of that sensuous couplet. He had no thought of bidding adieu to the enchanting waltzer, though it did cause him a strange thrill of pain to see another—even though he was a brilliant graduate of West Point—occupying the place that he felt belonged to him alone.

He would not allow his regret to show itself, and it was turned almost into pleasure by the conviction that Gladys herself shared it with him.

"Can it be that she loves me?" he often found himself murmuring. "Why should she bestow the wealth of her priceless love upon me, when she can bring the whole world at her feet. Ah, who can explain the wonderful workings of love?"

"Any one can understand why I should love her, for she is the queen of her sex, but who shall explain why she should select me from the hundreds so much my superior in every respect?"

It was all well enough that young Fred Melville should feel so modest concerning his own worth; but had the truth been told concerning him, it would have been, that in only one respect was he the inferior of others—and that was as to his worldly possessions.

After an eternity of waiting, it came Fred's turn once more to become the partner of Gladys in the dance.

"Don't," she whispered, looking reproachfully up in his glowing eyes, as his arm too impulsively sought its place; "you will draw attention to us."

"How can I help it?" he asked, in turn, restraining his feelings by what seemed a superhuman effort.

"You must," she whispered, woman-like, returning the warm pressure of his hand; "for it is no more difficult for you than it is for me."

"Oh," he gasped, "such confessions will set me wild."

"Then I withdraw them," she added, with a coquettish, sidelong glance that was like pouring oil on the flame.

"They cannot be withdrawn; once uttered they are beyond recall, and never can my heart grow weary of hearing them repeated."

"We mustn't forget, Fred, that we are in a

crowd," she said, really afraid that her lover would lose command of himself.

"I care not for others, so long as I am with you; what would it be to me if I should lose the whole world and yet gain you?"

"Fred," she whispered, "you have promised that you will do anything that I ask you to do."

"If it is possible; I cannot promise impossibilities."

"You must control yourself."

Even as she uttered the command, the lustrous eyes, overrunning with love, contradicted the words.

She spoke the truth when she said it was as hard for her as it was for him to hide her affection, even in the presence of hundreds.

CHAPTER IV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

AT midnight the enjoyment and festivities in the magnificent mansion and on the splendid grounds of Ravenswold were at their height.

Fred Melville had led Gladys Linden, glowing with love and beauty to a seat at the side of the dancing hall, when a boy in the blue uniform of the messenger of the Western Union Telegraph Company, cap in hand approached and handed her a note.

"What can this mean?" asked the startled lady, hurriedly opening the yellow envelope and reading the few lines penciled within.

Fred's eyes were fastened on the lovely face, while she was thus engaged and he noticed the sudden paling of the countenance and the flash of the eyes.

"I hope it is no bad news," he said sympathetically.

"I must go home at once," she said, handing him the slip of paper on which he read the following:

"MY DEAR GLADYS:—Your uncle is worse. He does not wish me to disturb you, but I know you would feel grieved if anything serious happened to him and you were not present. Do not feel alarmed, but come at once. I have sent the carriage for you.
YOUR AUNT."

"I am extremely sorry," said Fred, rising to his feet as his beloved made haste to get her wraps; "I hope that it will not prove so serious as your aunt dreads."

"I pray that it may not, but she would not send for me unless there was good cause for alarm. I will be with you in a minute," she added as she took back the slip of paper and hurried away.

She quickly returned and Fred escorted her to the street where the carriage was drawn up by the steps at the walk, with the driver waiting on the box.

In that exciting moment, Fred had no eyes for any one or anything except Gladys. He helped her into the carriage, receiving a warm pressure of the hand in return for his own and she hastily called a good-night to him as the carriage door was banged shut and the vehicle rolled rapidly away.

He stood a moment looking at it as it rumbled off, visible for a brief space in the bright glare of light which reached the broad highway.

Fred noticed, at the very moment it vanished that while it seemed to be the carriage of Tudor Carew, yet the driver on the box was a man whom he did not recollect ever to have seen before. He thought nothing of it at the time, but he bitterly recalled it soon afterward.

Gladys had made her adieus to Amy and Ada Walsingham, who promised to explain her sudden withdrawal to the others.

"There goes my light and life," muttered the infatuated Fred Melville, as he turned about and slowly walked back over the winding graveled walk, with the joyous couples on every hand; "with her gone, the sun has ceased to shine in the heavens. Mystery of mysteries, that she should select me as the object of her priceless love—"

"Are you Mr. Melville?" asked a youth, who, although in the same blue uniform of the other messenger, was another boy.

"Yes, sir; what can I do for you, my young friend?"

"Your father and mother live on Lawn avenue, do they not?"

"Yes—is anything the matter?" asked Fred, his heart almost ceasing to beat.

"Your father had a fall in coming down-stairs awhile ago—"

"Was he hurt?"

"I believe his leg is broken and—"

But the son had heard enough. He was off like a shot to the dressing-room, where he quickly donned his overcoat and catching up his hat, hastily made his farewells and came down the walk on a run.

Even in that moment when his whole being was throbbing with alarm, for his beloved parent, the young man was struck by the singular coincidence that two messages so similar in import should reach him and Gladys almost at the same moment.

Strange human nature this of ours. Grieved and distressed, he was yet able to find something like consolation in the consciousness that when fate smote his beloved it gave him a similar

blow. It would be hard to analyze or explain the fact, but so it was.

Fred Melville had a considerable distance to travel in order to reach his humble home which was at the opposite end of the town, but he was active, athletic and in bounding health, and it need not be said that he did not allow the grass to grow under his feet.

He was the only support of his aged father and mother, whose hearts were wrapped up in him, for the reader need not be reminded that he was a son of whom any parents could feel proud.

As he drew near his home, his thoughts became more and more occupied with sorrow for the misfortune that had befallen his feeble parent.

"It will go hard with him," he repeated more than once, "for the bones of old persons do not knit readily, and then how he must have suffered—poor father."

The instant he caught sight of the humble little cottage, he glanced up at the upper story where he saw a light burning.

"I hope it is not so serious as I was told. It will be hard on mother, too," he added, quickening his pace to a walk that was almost a run, "but I will hire a nurse and make it as light as I can."

The reflection that it would compel him to a more personal rigid economy than ever to pay an attendant, caused him pleasure rather than pain.

For is it not a truth that it is the sweetest pleasure in the world to suffer for those whom we love?

The next minute the son was in the house and went up the stairs three steps at a time. Bursting into his parents' room, he stopped short and looked around.

The light was burning dimly, and stepping across the apartment, he turned it up to a full head.

The aged couple lay in bed seemingly in a peaceful sleep.

The slight noise, however, awakened his mother, who looked at him with her usual sweet smile, as he bent over and kissed her cheek.

"Is that you, my son?"

"Yes—but how is father?"

"Why, what's the matter with him?" asked the mother, glancing with a faint expression of terror at him, as though something dreadful had happened.

"Why—why, didn't he fall down-stairs and break his leg?"

"Mercy, no! not that I know of," she exclaimed, as with pardonable inconsistency she shook her consort by the shoulder with the request that he would awake at once and explain the particulars of the awful experiences through which he had passed while she was asleep.

A man is always slower in regaining his senses than a woman, and it was some minutes before the genial old gentleman was able to grasp the situation.

When at last everything was made plain, he burst into a hearty laugh.

"Why, Fred, my boy, I haven't felt better in ten years than I do this minute; I haven't fallen down-stairs since I was grown up, and you can make up your mind that some one has been playing a joke on you—a sorry joke I must confess, but none the less it was one."

Fred Melville had dropped back in his chair near the head of the bed, with a blanched face and rapidly throbbing heart.

What could it mean?

A vague, awful horror was creeping into his soul!

It was a cruel jest of which he was the victim, but he cared nothing for that at this time; his parents were unharmed, but—

What of Gladys Linden?

The coincidence that had struck him some time before was more than a coincidence.

It had a fearful significance!

Precisely the same means had been employed to get her away from Ravenswold that had been used to draw him thence.

It was impossible for Fred to understand what reason there could be for wishing him to leave the place, after Gladys had been decoyed into departing.

And what cause could there be for the trick played upon her?

Alas! what reason could there be but the worst possible one?

Some infatuated devotee of the beautiful woman, despairing of winning her heart by fair means, had resorted to the foulest method of all.

But it was useless to sit still while his fears ran riot through his brain.

Nothing was to be gained by acquainting his parents with his terror, so hiding his tumult of emotion as best he could, he quietly arose with the remark:

"This fright has given me such a shaking up that I won't be able to sleep for an hour or two yet; so I guess I will light a cigar and take a stroll before turning in. Go to sleep again, and think no more about me."

He kissed both, as had been his custom from infancy, and passing out the room, softly closed the door behind him.

"Great Heaven!" he murmured, when on the street; "is the world turned upside down? What can all this mean? Who is at the bottom of this infernal handiwork?"

He was acting on the theory that a dreadful deception had been played upon his beloved, though at times there came a weak hope that he was mistaken and that she had been summoned home by a genuine message from her aunt.

Turning toward the residence of Tudor Carew, he walked rapidly over the quarter of a mile intervening between his own home and that.

His brain was in a whirl and it may be said that his thoughts tumbled over each other so rapid and kaleidoscopic were their changes.

He recalled the fact that the man who drove the carriage in which she left Ravenswold was a stranger, though he had not noticed him closely enough to identify him should they meet again.

He thought, too, that there was a perceptible difference in the appearance of the carriage which brought him and her there and was used to take her away.

On that point, however, it was possible that he was mistaken.

It was probably half-past one o'clock or later, when Fred Melville started for his home in obedience to the bogus message, so that it was almost two when he drew near the gate, leading up the broad path to the house of Tudor Carew.

There was a faint moon in the sky and the lamps were burning dimly. By their light he distinguished the outlines of a man standing within the gate and leaning upon it. He was quietly smoking a cigar and the amazement of Fred may be imagined when he identified him as no other than Mr. Carew himself.

"Good-evening," said the elderly gentleman in answer to the salutation of the younger, "I felt so much better that I ventured out in the fresh air to smoke a cigar."

"How have you been all the evening, Mr. Carew?"

"I felt pretty bad just before Gladys and you went away, but immediately after I began to improve and I am thankful to say that I am entirely recovered. But what means this? Where is Gladys?"

It was as poor Fred had feared. His beloved had not reached home.

He hurriedly told his frightful story.

"Great heavens!" gasped her uncle reeling backward and catching hold of the gate to save himself from falling; "she has been abducted! This blow will kill her aunt and it will kill me! What shall we do? what shall we do?"

CHAPTER V.

A FEARFUL AWAKENING.

WITH a heart almost bursting with grief, Gladys Linden hurried into his carriage that was drawn up and awaiting her beside Ravenswold, where the birthday fete of the Misses Walsingham was so brilliantly celebrated.

At the very moment her lover closed the door behind her, raised his hat and repeated his tender good-night, she heard the town clock boom the hour of one.

"Poor uncle Tudor," she muttered to herself, "he must be seriously ill, or aunt would not have sent for me. He is getting old, and he can't stand many more of those attacks. Can it be he is dead?"

She gasped and shivered, as she asked herself the dreadful question.

Then, covering her face with her hands, she gave way for a brief while to her tempest of grief.

She was deeply attached to her aunt and uncle, for they were the nearest relatives she possessed in the world, and it seemed to her that if they should die, she could not live. In truth she was sure she could not, excepting for one thing.

That was the love of Fred Melville.

Through every grief, and through all anguish, no matter how poignant, that sweetly thrilling delight permeated, cheering her when every other worldly source of comfort failed.

"If he should die," she whispered, referring to her lover, and overcoming her passionate outburst of sorrow, "then I know I should die, for I would not want to live."

She was glad because of one thing: the driver was pushing the horses to unusual speed. At that rate, it would not take long to reach her home.

She leaned back against the seat, with her hands to her face, not crying but strangely stirred by her emotions, and wishing that the steeds were winged so that she could rush to the bedside of her beloved relative.

She had been his pet from childhood, and she almost longed for the opportunity of repaying some of the loving attentions which he had showered upon her.

That the carriage was going very fast was proven, not so much by the swift, gliding movement as by the violence with which the wheels bounded in air when they struck some slight obstruction.

At such times of strong emotion the minutes pass slowly, and after a while Gladys began to

wonder why it was they were so long in reaching their destination.

"It is not very far," she said to herself, "and the horses are traveling at a rate that ought to have taken them home before this."

As she looked out of the window at the side of the door, she observed that no lamps were shining, and the faint moonlight gave only a misty outline of the trees at the side of the road.

"It is so late," she concluded, "that I suppose the lamps have been extinguished."

As yet she felt no alarm, and leaning back again in her seat, she strove to curb her impatience.

But when ten more minutes elapsed, and the swift motion of the carriage continued, with no glimmering lights on either side, she felt a sudden pang of terrible misgiving.

Lowering the window in the upper part of the door on her right, she thrust out her head and looked upward and forward at the seat.

Instead of one, there were two men seated on the box.

Then the affrighted Gladys glanced more sharply at the side of the street.

It was not a street, but a country highway!

The carriage had left Asheville long before, and was spinning over a lonely road.

For one minute she was utterly crushed and overwhelmed. She knew at once that a frightful lie had been enacted for the purpose of bringing her away from Ravenswold—that her uncle was not ill and that she was abducted!

What should she do? It would do no good, and might cause much harm for her to cry out. She was in such a lonely part of the country, that no help could be summoned and to attempt to do so might precipitate violent measures on the part of her abductors.

But she could not sit still and ride unresistingly to destruction.

"I will open the door and leap out," she thought; "they may not notice me and I can make my way back to Asheville."

She turned the handle of the door with the purpose of carrying the resolution into effect. The catch moved readily, but when she pushed on the door it did not yield. She turned the handle back and forth again and pressed with all the strength at her command; but there was not the slightest giving way.

Then she tried the other door in the same persistent and vigorous manner, but only with the same result!

The abductors had done their work well; the doors were so securely fastened that they could not be moved.

"God help me!" moaned the poor girl, once more leaning back in the carriage and burying her face in her hands.

"Who has done this?" was the question that came to her, supplemented by the equally dreadful one, "What will be the end?"

Meanwhile the carriage bowed along at the same rapid pace. The rumbling of planks beneath the wheels showed that the vehicle was passing over a bridge.

Glancing through the window on her right, she caught the gleam of water. A broad lake spread out over many acres, dimly seen in the moonlight.

"Oh that I could bury myself there," she wailed, in the bitterness of anguish; "but then what would become of Fred? If he but knew my distress, how quickly he would fly to my relief!"

But he could not know until the morrow, and by that time the whole country would be aroused.

But would it not be too late?

By daylight she would be many miles from Asheville and her friends.

What means could they take to rescue her?

The manner in which she had been summoned from Ravenswold and the fastening of the carriage doors, were evidence that the guilty parties were not only daring and audacious but skillful as well.

It might be set down as certain that they had neglected no precaution to hide their trail.

What though Asheville was in the midst of an agricultural region, and within a short distance of the metropolis of the Union, that was no reason why such an abduction should not meet with full success.

A half hour's ride, as was proven in her own case, from the bustling little town would take a person into a region as lonely as can be found in the wilds of the Carolinas.

But youth, beauty and bounding health do not yield supinely to despair. In a few minutes, Gladys Linden began to rally from her terrible depression that came with the first shocking realization of the deception to which she had been subjected.

She resolved that, come what might, she would never be an unresisting victim. True, she was only a weak woman, totally unarmed and with but a tithe of the strength of an ordinary man, but, inspired and thrilled by the knowledge of what was at stake, she believed she would become a tigress in the extremity which threatened her.

In the whirl of excitement and emotion, it was impossible for the fair one to take accurate account of the passage of time. Recalling the sound of the town clock, when she was stepping

into the carriage, she drew out her chatelaine watch to examine its face, but the light of the moon was too dim to give her the knowledge she sought.

Every few minutes she tried the doors, only to find that they were secured too strongly for her to stir them.

Once a wild thought of forcing her way through the window came to her, only to be dismissed the next minute.

The sky that had been clear all the evening, showed signs of a gathering storm. Dark, tumultuous clouds rolled across the face of the moon, shutting out its light and wrapping the earth in such a mantle of gloom that she shuddered with terror.

Although it was quite late in the autumn, yet the rumbling of thunder reverberated along the sky, and forked flashes of lightning pierced the gloom like swords of crimson fire.

By one of the vivid illuminations, Gladys glanced at her watch and saw that it was precisely half-past one; a much briefer space of time than she supposed had passed since she entered the carriage.

It will be remembered that at that hour Fred Melville was hurrying to his own home from Ravenswold, and the sky was clear.

The storm, therefore, was local, not reaching Asheville and the birthday festivities continued uninterruptedly until the gray light of morning appeared in the east.

By and by big drops of water struck the roof of the carriage, with a noise like the pattering of hail. In the space of a few seconds, the flood was descending with a fury that threatened to sweep everything before it.

The heart of the lady almost ceased its beating, as the carriage suddenly halted.

Just then, by a flaming glare of lightning, she discerned a figure at the side of the vehicle. It was one of the men who had been riding on the seat from which he was driven by the violence of the tempest.

Grasping the door, he moved the handle in a peculiar way, but uttered a curse because he was compelled to do so several times before he could jerk it open.

Then he sprang in, banged it shut again and raised the window of the door and shouted to the driver to go ahead.

That same vivid flash which had revealed the dreaded figure to the terrified Gladys showed the face of the man.

And she recognized it!

The recognition gave her a shock equal to that which crushed her the moment she awoke to the fact that she was in the power of her abductors.

But she uttered no exclamation, sitting quiet and leaning as far back in the seat as she could.

The man said nothing, but sitting opposite, continued to smoke a cigar that had survived the drenching rain. When he drew on it, the glow of the red coal-like end was reflected against his countenance, revealing the end of his hooked nose his mustache and whiskers and once or twice gave a view of his gleaming eyes.

Yes; Gladys Linden recognized him with a shudder of unspeakable dread, but she neither spoke nor stirred and he seemed content to abide his time.

Suddenly the carriage made a sweeping turn to the right, and she saw that it had left the main road and was speeding up a long narrow lane, so densely shaded by trees that few drops of the rain rattled against the roof or side of the vehicle.

CHAPTER VI.

GATHERING UP THE THREADS.

NOTHING less than an earthquake will ever again stir Asheville as it was stirred on the morning succeeding the birthday party of the Misses Walsingham.

The bank had been broken into, the watchman half killed, and more than two hundred thousand dollars carried off.

Gladys Linden, the brilliant, beautiful and idolized ward of the president of the bank had been stolen and no one could tell whither she was taken.

One of those events was enough to strike every citizen breathless; the two went beyond and gave everybody his tongue.

The events were so prodigious of themselves that we must for a time follow them separately, though they soon became interwoven in a startling manner.

It need not be said that the most skillful detective agencies were set to work without an hour's unnecessary delay.

Budge Martin, the watchman, although badly hurt was not mortally injured. His escape, as his acquaintances maintained, was due to the phenomenal thickness of his skull.

He was able to sit up and talk connectedly with Cutt Whitney, the detective, who was admitted to his room, where he lay on his bed, with his head heavily bandaged.

Tudor Carew, the president of the bank, would have been present at the interview had he not been utterly prostrated by the disappear-

ance of his niece and ward. Instant measures were set on foot in that direction and the utmost energy shown.

First of all, the keen-eyed detective asked Budge to tell his story in his own way, while he listened attentively, occasionally asking an incisive question.

Then he proceeded to question him.

"You say that the voice of the man who rattled the door closely resembled that of Mr. Carew?"

"I never seen two voices so much alike," was the reply of Budge, as he set down his glass of water; "I really think it was more like Mr. Carew's than Mr. Carew's is."

"And he referred to your little boy there by a pet name?"

"Yes; he spoke of Dit-Dat-Dot, which the same is the only name Mr. Carew calls him by, and no one else does the same."

"Did you get a glimpse of any one of the burglars' faces?"

"No; I wish I had, but they kept their black cloths over their features so I couldn't see much of nothin' except their eyes, which looked dreadful enough."

"Did either of the parties address the other by name?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you hear?"

"One of 'em was called 'Ash,' and the other 'Fred,' but neither time was the tall man called that, unless I'm mistaken."

"How often did you hear the name 'Ash'?"

"Only once."

"How often that of 'Fred'?"

"Twice."

"Are you sure?"

"There can't be no mistake about it."

Detective Whitney hummed, and thoughtfully rubbed his smoothly-shaven chin, as he had a way of doing when forcibly struck by some new idea.

"He heard it called twice," he reflected.

"Now, if it had been only once, it would have been an accident, but twice shows that more than likely it was done on purpose—no doubt for the benefit of Mr. Budge Martin."

"Do you know any one named Fred?"

"Of course; Fred Melville is the bookkeeper."

"Where?"

"In the bank; why, I thought everybody knew that," added Budge, forgetful of the fact that there were a few other cities and towns in the United States besides Asheville.

Mr. Whitney again rubbed his chin, and hummed softly to himself.

There was little more to be obtained from the battered watchman, and, after some unimportant inquiries, the detective took his leave.

The presence of the brilliant Cutt Whitney in Asheville was known only to three persons, two of whom were Mr. Carew, the president, and Hyneman, the cashier.

Even Budge Martin thought he was a newspaper reporter, who was arranging to have his portrait published in the daily papers, with a thrilling account of the daring exploit by which the guardian had the wool pulled over his eyes.

"Mr. Hyneman," said the detective, when sure that he was alone with that gentleman; "what kind of a man is your bookkeeper, Mr. Melville?"

"A model gentleman, in every respect. He is attentive to his duties, intelligent, respectful and a universal favorite."

"How many persons in the bank are acquainted with the combination by which the door of the vault is opened?"

"Only two; Mr. Carew and myself."

"Are you certain?"

"Ah, hold on; Mr. Carew said the other day that he would probably make a business trip this week, which would take him away for an indefinite time. He thought that the secret of the combination should be in the possession of two persons, and he asked me to give it to our young friend."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Frederic Melville, our bookkeeper."

"Did you do as he suggested?"

"I did, day before yesterday; it had slipped my mind altogether."

Once more Cutt Whitney hummed and rubbed his chin—the trail was becoming warm.

"Where is this Mr. Melville?"

"I cannot say."

"Why is he not on duty?"

"He was so shocked by the abduction of Miss Linden that he was unable to work. He asked for a few days' leave of absence and it was granted."

"Why should he be so affected by her misfortune?"

"They are very fond of each other."

"Engaged?"

"I cannot say, but I think so, though she is an heiress and he is a poor man."

"When were they together last?"

"Last night, at Ravenswold; he was her escort; shortly after she was called home by the bogus message, he too was summoned away."

The thumb and forefinger of the officer softly moved along his chin, meeting beneath, while he looked at the blank wall behind the cashier. A few minutes later, Mr. Whitney was mov-

ing so quietly around the streets of Asheville that he attracted no particular attention.

He was in quest of information, and he obtained lots of it; and it was suggestive too.

There could be no doubt that Budge Martin had heard one of the masked burglars twice addressed by the name of Fred. Fred Melville was the only party besides the president and cashier of the bank who knew of the combination by which the treasures of the vault could be reached.

Fred had left Ravenswold at one o'clock at night and did not return. This fact could be established beyond proof.

There was naught beyond the assertion of the young man himself to make known what time he reached home.

He had awakened his parents from a sound sleep, but since nothing had been said by either of them about the hour of the night, and no means had been taken to learn it, the precise time was beyond reach.

True, Budge Martin insisted that he heard the town clock strike one, in addition to the glance which he took at the clock, but it was easy for him to be mistaken.

No doubt the clock struck twice and he caught but the single stroke, while in the dim light of the bank, and with his spectacles, he could readily interpret wrongly the hands of the timepiece.

It looked as if an inextricable web was weaving around Fred Melville, and, before the detective had progressed far along his line of investigation, he had almost settled into the belief that he was the guilty man.

But this conviction or rather suspicion was by no means clear.

The universal popularity of the young man, his kindness to his parents, his intelligence and manly qualities were all pictured to the officer in such glowing colors that he could not repress a liking for him though the two had never met.

But the successful detective must know nothing like friendship or sentiment. Too often, indeed, he is obliged to forget that man is given such a thing as conscience.

And yet being a man, the most successful of the profession can never dissociate himself entirely from his better nature.

Cutt Whitney had gathered the points named together with many others and posting them all in his mental ledger they stood something like this:

Arrayed against the young man was the fact undoubtedly established, that he was engaged in marriage to Gladys Linden, a young lady possessing large wealth.

What more natural than that he should be anxious to procure the means with which to act the part of such a favored individual?

With the care of his parents on his hands and his moderate salary, such means could not be secured except by some bold stroke or lucky turn of the wheel of fortune.

He had vanished from the grand entertainment near the hour when the bank was robbed. His whereabouts from the moment of his disappearance until daylight could not be traced.

He was now absent under the plea of lending his efforts to rescue the missing Gladys Linden.

This made a dark case, it must be admitted against the young man, but the credit side was not without its entries.

First, was the universal favor with which he was regarded and the fact that from his boyhood he had never been known to tell a lie or do a mean thing.

Men do not become wicked all at once, for vice like virtue is a growth, and yet the scoundrel may play the hypocrite for years without detection.

So it would not do to attach too much weight to that feature of the case.

The hour of the robbery as given by the watchman and the time of Fred's departure from Ravenswold, if correct, rendered it impossible that Fred Melville should have had a hand in the robbery.

Doubtless a lawyer could make a good defense for him on that ground alone; but, standing by itself it could scarcely save him, for the testimony of such a man as Budge Martin could not be easily shaken.

But the single fact that threw the most doubt into the mind of the detective was one that the reader would never suspect, for it seemed a trifle "lighter than air."

CHAPTER VII.

A SLIP OF PAPER.

THE trifle which caused so much doubt in the mind of Cutt Whitney the detective was the declaration of Budge Martin that he had heard one of the burglars twice addressed by the name of Fred.

The cause of the officer's misgiving has already been mentioned. Criminals at such times are extremely careful about giving such palpable clues. In the excitement of this occasion, a single slip might occur, but for the name to be repeated looked very much as if it was done intentionally, and with the view of fastening suspicion upon an innocent party.

But the detective as yet was hovering only on the border line of his investigation.

Two separate messenger boys had been employed to carry the misleading messages to Gladys Linden and Fred Melville; it was necessary to find and question those lads.

There was no difficulty in doing this.

The office of the Western Union Telegraph Company employed a couple and they proved to be the ones that were wanted.

The story of each was similar.

A number of prominent gentlemen from New York were attendants at the entertainment given by Mr. Leon Walsingham at Ravenswold, among whom were a couple of leading officials of the Telegraph Company. By their orders, the local office was kept open all night in order that some important dispatches might be sent and received.

Several such passed over the wires after the hour of midnight.

The two messengers were dozing in the office, when a gentleman called for their services. He wished to send two communications to different parties at Ravenswold, and since each lad was liberally fed they eagerly undertook the task, executing it too with a promptness and faithfulness altogether phenomenal in their class.

After paying the office the regular fee, the stranger, who was well dressed and without anything specially striking in his appearance, met the two messengers outside, and, while walking in the direction of Ravenswold, gave them their instructions.

The first was to deliver a sealed letter into the hands of Miss Gladys Linden. The second was to linger in the street outside until after her departure, and then hand his message to Frederic Melville.

We have shown that these instructions were carried out.

The stranger having paid the boys for their services in advance, disappeared, though it was supposed that he remained in the vicinity of Ravenswold until he saw that his orders were strictly followed.

The description of this stranger was so meager that it was anything but satisfactory to the officer.

He was well dressed, of ordinary height, wore a full beard and had a pleasant, musical voice.

The closest questioning and inquiries brought nothing else to the surface. Consequently Cutt Whitney was unable to form any suspicion of his identity.

But one highly important fact was established: the robbery of the Asheville Bank and the abduction of Gladys Linden were planned and carried out by the same combination of individuals.

"And a single master mind and moving spirit was behind both," was the conclusion of the officer; "he laid the daring plan and his lieutenants carried it out."

In moving about the pleasant little town in which the stirring events had taken place, Cutt Whitney several times encountered a middle-aged gentleman, dressed in the garb of a farmer, with a broad-brimmed hat and a winning simplicity of countenance, which led most of the townspeople to set him down for what he claimed to be, Mr. Peleg White from New Hampshire, who was looking for a married niece of his, that had promised to go back to New England with him on a visit to his relatives.

When Cutt Whitney and Uncle Peleg met, as they occasionally did, they stared inquiringly at each other, as though they were entire strangers.

And yet they were two of the most intimate friends in the world. Uncle Peleg, as he was called, was the famous detective, known among his friends as Zigzag, and a more brilliant officer never ran a gang of Texan train-robbers or bank burglars to earth.

Zigzag was in Asheville for the purpose of tracing out the abductors of Gladys Linden and restoring her to her friends. The manner in which he went about his task will be told right speedily.

It was early in the afternoon that Cutt Whitney strolled out to the residence of Tudor Carew, the President of the Asheville Bank, and the uncle and guardian of the missing Gladys Linden.

The officer had some important questions which he wished to ask of that gentleman.

In answer to his inquiries in the hall, the servant said that she would ask Mr. Carew whether he felt well enough to hold an interview with him.

The detective seated himself in the reception room, while the girl went above to see her master.

A man in the profession of Cutt Whitney learns to keep his senses always with him, and to allow not even the most trifling occurrence to escape; for it is often that momentous results depend upon apparently insignificant causes.

Sitting in the room below stairs, in one of the most quiet streets of the town, and in a house where the stillness was as profound as that of the tomb, the caller was able to hear every movement in the room directly over his head.

He heard the servants knock gently on the door, the summons to "Come in," the opening and partial closing of the door, and then the murmur of voices. As silently as a cat, Whitney stepped into the hall and busied himself

arranging his hair in front of the little mirror in the hat-rack.

This is what he overheard:

"Mr. Higgins did you say?" asked the bank president.

"That's the name, sor, that he give me."

It should be stated that the name mentioned was the one used by the detective in making his investigations in Asheville, and Tudor Carew identified him at once.

"I didn't expect him," said the latter, as if unpleasantly disappointed by the call.

After a moment's hesitation he added:

"Send him up in about five minutes; I feel rather weak, and I want to have time to remove my clothing and lie down."

"So the old gentleman is sitting up," muttered the detective, stepping back into the reception-room just as the servant emerged and brought him the message. "I am glad to learn that he is recovering from his prostration caused by the abduction of his niece."

Waiting a decorous time, the officer entered the room of the bank president, who was stretched out in bed and looking quite feeble and distressed.

He nodded faintly, like one who had but an infant's strength remaining, and, in answer to his visitor's apologies, remarked that he was glad he had come, as he was glad to talk to some one. His wife was so ill that she could see no one besides the physician.

Replying to Mr. Carew's inquiries, his caller said that he had made little, if any, progress in tracing the missing bank funds, and the criminals who had robbed the vaults. He hoped that in the course of a few days he would secure some definite clew.

Then Cutt Whitney asked several questions:

"You told me, Mr. Carew, that the first news you received of the disappearance of your niece, was from Fred Melville?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any means of recalling the hour at which he appeared in front of your house with the knowledge?"

"Rather curiously, I have. You may not know that I was staggered by the blow, so much, indeed, that if I had not caught hold of the gate to support myself, I would have fallen to the earth."

"I do not wonder."

"At that moment I began to rally from the dreadful shock, I heard the town clock strike twice—so," added the old gentleman, with a wan smile, "it must have been near two o'clock when Mr. Melville stopped with the terrible news."

The detective hummed to himself, and softly rubbed his chin.

"Why do you ask?" demanded the sick man, with a sudden interest, and sharp look into the face of the man at his bedside.

"I have no special reason, but I would like to fix the movement of every party concerned in this business. I am interested even in knowing what you did."

There was a purpose in this question, which shot from the lips of the officer with such brisk abruptness, that a half angry flush flamed across the face of the old gentleman, despite the guileless smile on that of his visitor.

The observing eye of the latter missed nothing in the room. He could have told, without the unimportant words which he overheard, that his host was sitting by the front window, reading a daily paper and smoking a cigar, at the time that Mr. Higgins was announced.

The odor of tobacco smoke was in the room, though the windows had been lowered, and the paper lay on the floor where he had flung it when preparing for bed. There were other evidences of a hurried disrobing, and the caller noticed particularly that the vest of the bank president was flung over the back of a chair in a way which betokened haste and carelessness.

He also observed the corner of a slip of paper, peeping just above the upper pocket of the vest, the garment being folded in such a way that it shut the paper from the sight of the owner.

Cutt Whitney determined to get possession of that slip of paper.

"That's a fine painting," he remarked, glancing admiringly up at a view called "Sunset on the Coast," which was suspended against the wall, just above the chair supporting the vest of Mr. Carew.

"Yes," replied the latter, who had clasped his hands behind his head, and now looked in the same direction as though the painting had suddenly assumed a new interest to him; "I paid fifteen hundred dollars for that at Burton's last sale."

It was the most natural thing in the world for the caller to step forward with the purpose of gaining a better view of the painting in the dimly-lit room.

It was the most natural thing in the world, too, that he should lean one hand on the back of the chair to support his weight while admiring the work of art.

But the observing gentleman in bed failed to note the stealthy action of the right hand of the detective, the same being hidden by his interposing body, and the result of which was that the coveted slip of paper in the vest pocket was

transferred to a similar receptacle of the visitor, and that, too, without the slightest suspicious movement on his part.

Had any one been watching the actions of Mr. Cutt Whitney, he would have pronounced him a professional pickpocket.

All the same he scored his point.

After some more unimportant inquiries, Mr. Whitney bade his friend good-day, expressing the hope that he would soon recover, and that his beloved niece would be speedily restored to him unharmed.

Once outside, when he had gone far enough to feel secure against observation, Cutt Whitney drew forth the slip of paper and folded it.

This was what he saw penciled within—only this and nothing more:

"3315534442345424314115433242234432151544114434233444231542221132152124531514442344151524334423244344523424334423114444."

"Ah, ha," smiled the detective, refolding the slip and carefully depositing it within his pocket-book; "I ain't worth a rush to unravel those confounded puzzles, but I know a man who has never been stumped, which his name just now is Uncle Peleg and I will hand this over to him; he will make short work with it."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN APPARITION.

WE have said that Gladys Linden recognized the man who sat opposite to her in the carriage in which she was whirled rapidly away from Ravenswold.

He hastily entered the vehicle to escape the drenching rain, and he continued smoking his offensive cigar without so much as asking her permission.

He evidently felt that the circumstances forbade any assumption of deference or courtesy.

His presence proved that he had taken a hand in one of the most daring outrages ever known, and to pretend now to any consideration for her feelings, would be too much like the Sicilian bandit who apologizes for the pain he causes his victim when he pushes the fatal poniard between his ribs.

The hundred yards of smooth running, along the lane, thickly lined on both sides with spreading trees, which even so late in autumn, had such a wealth of leaves clinging to their limbs that they shut out most of the rain, and the carriage drew up in front of the covered porch of an old-fashioned mansion. In the hall beyond a light was brightly burning, although no person was observable moving about the premises, nor did any one open the door from within to receive the visitors.

Hardly had the carriage halted, when the young lady's escort flung his cigar out of the window which he had lowered, pushed the carriage door open, stepped out, and turned around.

The light that came through the glass over the broad massive doors inclosed the carriage so that the movements of all three were perceptible to each other.

"Now, if you will move quickly," said the man, in a not unpleasant voice, "you will not get more than a drop of rain on you."

During the few minutes occupied in coming up the lane, Gladys Linden had done a vast amount of thinking, and had decided on her course of action.

Nothing was clearer to her than that it would be unwise to scream, hold back or resist—except of course, in an extremity. She could not stay in the carriage all night, nor could she escape her abductors by any sudden break for freedom.

The fact that they had been able to bring her thus far from home, was clear proof that they were prepared for an emergency.

To the surprise, therefore, of her escort, Gladys instantly rose from her seat, placed her delicate foot on the step of the carriage, accepted the offered hand of the man and dropped lightly upon the broad stone, which was but a few inches below the side of the vehicle.

"Thank you, Mr. Buckholtz," she said, in her most gracious manner; "you are extremely kind."

"Rather say extremely honored," he replied, with a grin which was visible in the dim light despite his all-enveloping mustache and beard.

"Hardly so, when the honor on my part is unwilling."

"But it is none the less an honor because of that."

With the grace of a cavalier he escorted her the few steps to the door, which was opened without the use of a key. The carriage was heard rolling away as the two passed within, and the man addressed as Mr. Buckholtz closed it behind them.

Gladys found herself within a broad, handsomely carpeted hall, with a massive hat-rack on the left, doors opening on either hand, a bright light, surrounded by figured and colored glass, burning overhead, and expansive winding stairs beyond.

She stood looking calmly in the face of the man, as if awaiting his orders. Before he could speak, she said:

"Mr. Aaron Buckholtz, what does this mean?"

He had removed his fine silk hat, which glistened more dazzlingly than usual because of the wetting it had received, and with the same courtly grace he had shown from the first, bowed low and smiled.

"The hour is rather late for an extended conversation, which I assure you I protest against out of consideration for you alone. To me it would be the highest happiness to spend an hour listening to your charming sentences, even though perforce they were tinged somewhat with gall. I am hopeful that I shall have many opportunities before being deprived of your company."

Gladys was at a loss to reply to this astonishing utterance. She continued gazing fixedly into the evil face before her, and, with another bow, the man added:

"If you will be kind enough to ascend the stairs and enter the door on the left, you will find your apartments prepared for you. I beg you to receive my assurance that you are perfectly safe, and that you will not suffer the least disturbance. *Bon jour.*"

What reply could be made to such amazing utterances? None, and the lady did not attempt any.

Without so much as acknowledging his salutation, she moved lightly up the broad steps, and, following the directions of her escort, entered the first door which presented itself on her left.

A succession of surprises awaited her. She passed into a large, finely-furnished room, in which was all the furniture, and, in truth, more than she could need. Tables, stands, chairs, a damask lounge, rich carpet, fine paintings on the walls—indeed everything that a lady of taste could wish were at her command.

Beyond, was the sleeping apartment, all the appointments as perfect as can be found in a modern city dwelling.

Gladys paused in astonishment, and stared around her. A brilliant lamp, suspended from the ceiling of the large room, illuminated both apartments, so that every object was in full view.

"Am I dreaming?" she murmured, moving slowly hither and thither, and scrutinizing the various articles of furniture and ornament.

She actually pinched her fair arm to make sure. The sharp pain told her that she was wide awake and everything was real.

The most striking fact was the truth of the remark of Aaron Buckholtz, her escort, to the effect that the apartments were prepared for her.

Across each window were stretched a number of iron bars, such as are found in prisons and lunatic asylums. Since they had not been placed recently in position, it was probable that Gladys Linden was not the first person who had suffered confinement behind them.

At the side of the larger room was an opening through which a dumb-waiter could be raised and lowered; in fact it may be said that there was nothing lacking to make the imprisonment of any person as comfortable as possible.

Suddenly Gladys thought of the door that she had closed behind her on entering the room.

Could she not slip through that, down stairs and out before discovery? She would not hesitate to flee through the storm and darkness, anywhere to escape her captors.

Stepping quickly and softly to the door she turned the knob.

But the same disappointment of the carriage awaited her; it could not be drawn inward as much as a hair's breadth.

It had either fastened itself when she drew it to, or some one had secured it after her entrance.

It mattered little how it was done; sufficient was it that she was a prisoner.

Little sleep came to the fair occupant of the prison that night. Her brain was in such a whirl that she could not rest. She reclined on the lounge, leaning her head on her hand and thinking, thinking, thinking.

What could she do? Evidently nothing, but wait, hope and pray.

Never did hapless captive send more urgent pleadings to Heaven than did poor Gladys Linden, as she knelt beside the lounge and poured out her very soul in an agony of supplication to her Heavenly Father for relief.

Finally, toward morning, as she lay on the lounge without disrobing, she sunk into a feverish slumber which lasted far into the next day.

When she roused herself and looked around, it was several minutes before she could recall where she was. Realizing her situation she sprang to her feet, and ran to one of the windows.

The sun was high in the heavens and shining from an unclouded sky. Hardly a trace of the night's storm remained, and the clear, crisp autumn air would have enlivened the spirits of any one less oppressed by grief than hers.

There was such a wealth of trees, mostly oak, around the building that the view of the prisoner was imperfect in every direction. She was able to catch a glimpse of broad, spreading fields,

the gleaming surface of a pond and a stretch of woods beyond. Not a living creature was in sight, if a small bird be excepted which flew back and forth among the limbs, singing and twittering, as if it bore some message for her.

Nor could the listening ear detect a sound of life within the building. She paused at the door, and moved hither and thither, but profound stillness reigned everywhere.

It occurred to her that the passageway through which the dumb-waiter ascended and descended might help, and she stepped to that.

That it had been moved recently was proven by the presence of a warm cup of coffee, some rolls and a well cooked chop.

The sight and odor of these brought something like an appetite to the young lady, who with a little hesitation made a good meal therefrom.

Replacing the vessels on the shelf, she waited to see them descend, but no such movement took place.

Gladys was confident that she would receive a call from Mr. Buckholtz, but the dreary afternoon wore away without any one opening the door leading to her room, and it was with a feeling of indescribable depression and sadness that she saw the shadows of night infolding her once more.

"Surely some one will come to me," she thought, "for the lamp must be lit and there must be a woman in the house."

A couple of hours after night had fully come, and the apartment was wrapped in darkness, she, still sitting by the window, observed that the moon was shining quite brightly—more so indeed than on the previous night when she left Ravenswold in the carriage which she supposed would take her home.

"If this continues much longer I shall go wild—"

Her heart gave a throb, for under the tree nearest to her window, she discerned the figure of a man, moving stealthily around and looking upward.

Something in his appearance struck her as familiar. At first she thought it was Fred Melville, but a second glimpse showed her her mistake.

Still she was sure it was an acquaintance and she held her breath.

Suddenly in moving about, the moonlight fell upon the upturned countenance and the startled Gladys uttered a suppressed scream and called him by name.

CHAPTER IX.

A MASS OF FIGURES.

ABOUT the middle of the afternoon, Cutt Whitney the detective was strolling along the streets of Asheville, when he met the verdant looking old gentleman known as Uncle Peleg White.

They stared at each other as they passed, but did not speak, nor show any evidence that either remembered to have met the other before; but had any one been watching them closely, he would observe that Cutt made a peculiar sign, with the hand which he drew slowly across his chin, in accordance with the habit that has already been noted.

The reply of Uncle Peleg was still slighter, but it was easily read by the other, and apprised him that his request had been understood and would be granted.

An hour later, Uncle Peleg strolled back to the hotel where he was stopping cross and out of sorts.

"Consarn it!" he exclaimed to the clerk; "everything goes wrong with me."

"What's happened?" asked the official with a grin.

"Enough I should think to make any man as cross as pizen. That niece of mine, Saramantha, started from Asheville for New Hampshire about the same hour I reckon that I started from New Hampshire for Asheville; ain't that enough to make a man strike his grandmother?"

"It might be worse; but all you have to do is to set out for New Hampshire."

"That shows all you know 'bout it. Some folks think they're mighty smart. Then she'll start hum ag'in and we'll meet on the road and so keep see-sawing, back and forth, till we die of old age or get blowed up by some b'iler of a steamboat or locomotive."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to sot down here and wait for her to come back, if I have to stay till I take root."

"No need of that; you can telegraph to your folks."

"Hang the telegraph! I don't believe in 'em; I'm so mad that I'm half sick, and if you'll let me have my key I'll go to my room and lay down for an hour or two. If I get asleep, don't forget to call me for supper, for I've got a tremendous appetite since I've come to this 'ere town."

The obliging clerk assured Uncle Peleg that he should not be forgotten, and the old gentleman swung heavily up-stairs to his apartment on the topmost floor.

A half hour later, Whitney sauntered into the office of the hotel and asked for the key of his room. His manner was that of a brisk busi-

ness man, who felt under no obligations to explain the reason why he wished to spend a brief time in privacy.

It so happened that his apartment was also on the upper floor and within a few doors of Uncle Peleg's.

"Come in," said the latter, when he recognized the familiar knock, and Whitney, glancing around, to make sure he was not observed, stepped softly within and locked the door behind him.

"Well, what is it, Cutt?" asked Uncle Peleg, using his natural manner, and making the query, after the two had exchanged some other questions and answers: "how are you making out?"

"Only fairly; how are you doing?"

"No better; I haven't struck a satisfactory clew yet, though I am in the shadow of several. There are some circumstances which puzzle me very much."

"It isn't the first time you have been puzzled—that is for a while, but you generally manage to dig your way out."

"Yes; I've been pretty successful—that is for me, but man is fallible and we are too wise to let the world know all of the tremendous blunders we make."

"You have one advantage over me," said Whitney, half-regretfully.

"What is that?"

"I am the only person in Asheville who suspects your identity."

"Are you sure of that?"

"There can be no doubt of it. Mr. Carew knows that the most skillful detective that can be found in the country is at work, but he does not believe it is you."

"Nor does any one else," laughed Zigzag. "But it was necessary he should know that we were not idle, for a man in his distressing situation cannot rest under the knowledge that anything is being neglected to rescue his niece; but I prefer to work on independent lines and in my own way."

"But there are others at it?"

"Yes," replied Zigzag, impatiently; "that's the worst of it. These amateurs are always putting in their oars, and the result is they double our difficulties. Fred Melville, I understand, has gone off to New York on what he thinks is a clew, and there's no telling where the others are. I have already tumbled over half a dozen."

Whitney now told the somewhat-startling facts which seemed to connect young Melville with the bank robbery.

"I heard that, and a little more," quietly remarked Zigzag, when his friend was through.

"Do you suspect the young man had anything to do with the burglary?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he had," was the cool reply of Zigzag. "He is poor, ambitious, and expects to marry Gladys Linden. He supports his father and mother, and his salary will not allow him to take the young heiress to many birthday entertainments at Ravenswood."

It struck Cutt Whitney that this was a rather heartless way of referring to a young man for whom he had formed, in spite of himself, a peculiar partiality; but, as may be said, the profession of the detective is the most heartless of all professions.

"However," added Zigzag, as if he read the thoughts of his friend, "it is too soon to speak with certainty; there is only one important fact clear—the abduction of the young lady and the robbery of the bank are two branches of the one tree—the same combination was concerned in each, and one arch-miscreant directed both. The identity of that master mind is the problem for us to solve."

"Have you any theory?"

"The detective who sets out with a theory is a fool; for, having such, he will compel every incident and clew to conform to that, instead of leaving his mind blank for the clews and incidents to build their own theory upon; therefore, I have no theory."

The farmer-looking old gentleman who sat on the edge of the bed, swinging his feet back and forth and puffing a cigar looked as if he hardly knew the meaning of the word "theory," but all the same, there was an odd twinkle of his bright eyes, which convinced Cutt Whitney that he had formed a conclusion as to the identity of that moving spirit in the dark business which nothing but the strongest evidence could overturn.

But it was useless to question him. If Zigzag chose to keep his own counsel, no ordinary power could move him.

Only one incident awaited telling by Whitney; that was the story of the slip of paper which he had deftly extracted from the pocket of Tudor Carew in the sick room of the latter.

The eyes of the great Zigzag fairly sparkled when he listened to this. He stopped swinging his feet, held his cigar motionless between his teeth and eagerly reached out for the paper which possessed unusual interest for him.

One of the boasts of Zigzag was that he had never yet found a cryptogram or piece of cipher-writing which he was unable to analyze and whose hidden meaning he could not bring to light.

No lover opening a missive from his beloved ever devoured the contents with more ravishing delight than did he feast upon the seemingly meaningless array of figures.

Let us give them again, for it is necessary to do so:

"33155344423454243141154332422234432151544114434233444231542221132152124531514442344151524334423244344523424334423114444."

Whitney kept his eyes fixed on the face of his friend, whose brows were contracted while he studied the bewildering array.

"I guess he is stumped this time," thought Cutt, "and it is no discredit to him if he is."

Several minutes passed, during which Zigzag did not seem to breathe. He held his cigar pressed tightly between his lips, and with the whole energy of his brain concentrated upon the task.

"I guess you'll have to give it up," suggested Whitney, at the end of ten or more minutes.

"I guess I won't!" replied the other, raising his eyes from the slip of paper, with an odd smile, while he puffed hard at his cigar that had nearly gone out.

"Well if you can make anything of it, let us know its meaning."

"Those figures read as plainly as any script can read, 'Next Thursday night. Meet at O. H. Other game fixed. Three in this, two in that. T.'"

Whitney thought his friend was jesting, seeing which Zigzag rose from the bed, and, drawing out a pencil, sat down in a chair near the stand.

"Let me explain; here, look over my shoulder and you will quickly catch on. The cipher is one of the oldest known. I have been familiar with it for years, and do not consider it one-half so difficult as many others that I have figured out. It is written on an ancient Greek method which required that every letter shall be represented by two figures. Some one letter previously agreed upon—and which in this case is J—is dropped from the alphabet. There is no J in the sentences I have given, but if there was, it would be shown by the ciphers. The twenty-five letters remaining are represented in the form of a square thus:

1	2	3	4	5
a	f	l	q	v-1
b	g	m	r	w-2
c	h	n	s	x-3
d	i	o	t	y-4
e	k	p	u	z-5

"Each letter is symbolized by the figures found by the intersection of a vertical with a horizontal line. Thus," added Zigzag, "to find the figures for 'a,' we take its vertical figure which is 1; then its horizontal figure which is also 1 and these together make 11."

"Now you will observe that the first two figures are 33; looking at the table which I have formed, you observe that the only figure in the vertical column 3 and in the horizontal column 3 is 'n'; the next couplet is 15; the letter 'e' is in vertical line 1 and the horizontal line 5; so that the first two letters of our sentence are 'Ne.'"

"It is not necessary for me to go through every letter in this fashion, for I have explained the law which governs the cipher from beginning to end. Applying that law you will find the translation precisely as I have given it."

Cutt Whitney solemnly straightened up and made a low obeisance.

"I bow to my master; if you will permit, I will take your hand."

"Wal, I'll be consarned!" exclaimed Uncle Peleg, struggling so clumsily to his feet, that he knocked the stand over; "I always knowed you didn't know much, Cutt," he added, as he took his hand, "but if you'll try hard you'll manage to show the world that you ain't such a big fool as you look. Don't be discouraged, my son."

CHAPTER X.

FACE TO FACE.

PEERING through the iron bars which held her a terrified captive within the unknown prison, Gladys Linden looked down at the upturned face that she was sure she had seen hundreds of times before, and the sight of which now thrilled her with the wildest hope.

It was the face of her uncle, Tudor Carew!

Yes; she was sure that it was he, standing with folded arms, peering at the barred window, as if striving to learn in what part of the strange house she was held prisoner.

"Oh, Uncle Tudor," called the fair captive, pressing against the cruel bars, "how thankful I am that you have found me; I am here—here in the room over your head, can you not see me?"

Still, the face of the man, looking strangely pale in the moonlight that fell upon it, was turned upward, and his folded arms and limbs remained motionless.

Gladys noticed the gleam of the eyes, the fixed look and the statue-like posture.

Once she fancied she could detect a movement of the lips, as though he was trying to utter something but could not.

"Uncle, why do you not speak to me? It is I, your own Gladys; wicked men brought me to this place, and you have come for me; do you not know me?"

And the heart-broken girl reached her fair arms between the bars and outward, as though she would clasp the loved one that had been such a good parent to her.

But alas! she could not and the lips of the upturned face were still mute.

A dreadful fear came over the maiden.

"He is dead," she gasped; "and it is not he but his apparition which I see!"

In a desperate effort to shake off the horrible spell, she turned away from the window, and, going to the mantle where she had noticed the matches through the day, she ignited one, mounted a chair and lit the lamp in the middle of the room.

Something like a reaction of spirits came over her, when the room was bathed in the rich, golden light and hope again stirred her heart.

"Of course that was Uncle Tudor," she said, with a strange laugh as she leaped down from the chair; "he could not understand why I was here, but now he will know and he will be as glad and happy as I am."

Hurrying back to the window, she called out. "You see me now, uncle; I cannot tell you how glad I am—"

She ceased abruptly, for she had become aware, in looking down, that her relative had vanished. Her straining eyes could catch no glimpse of him.

The same, vague awful fear once more took possession of her.

It was not her loved uncle upon whom she had looked but an apparition.

Naturally strong minded she was a prey to as little superstition as any of her sex, but that weakness runs to a greater or less degree through the make-up of us all," and she shuddered, as she recalled that silent, motionless figure beneath her window, heedless of her soulful plea for recognition.

"It was not he," she thought, again, "but his spirit."

Moving to the lamp over the center of the room, she turned down the light, so that only a dim illumination filled the apartment with its ghostly gloom.

Seating herself by the open window, she yielded to sad, sorrowful meditations.

"Nearly twenty-four hours have passed since I was so cruelly decoyed from home; why I have been brought here is more than I can guess; Aaron Buckholtz asked for my hand nearly a year ago; I treated him kindly, but assured him that I never could love him; for even that early my heart was given to Fred, the best and noblest of men; he went away sad and hopeless, but he uttered no threat against me, and he is the last person I would have suspected of this great wrong; but that he is the author cannot be doubted, since he did not hesitate to make himself known."

"Is he holding me for the purpose of ransom? If so, it is time that some word passed between him and my friends; such may have been the case without me knowing anything of it."

"Can it be that he hopes to persuade me to become his wife in order to save me from a dreadful fate?"

"I am sure he cannot be so base as that—"

A soft, rustling noise caused Gladys to start and withdraw her gaze from the moonlight outside.

She fancied she heard the door opened and closed, but accommodating her vision to the faint light in the room, she observed that the door was shut, as it had been ever since she closed it behind her the night before.

But what did her eyes behold in the middle of the apartment?

The figure of a man, standing erect, with his hands hanging by his side and his burning gaze fixed upon her.

It was the same figure that she had seen a short time before under her window, and to which she had so vainly appealed.

It was the apparition of her uncle, Tudor Carew, the pale face and features unmistakable in the dim illumination of the room.

He was standing directly beneath the chandelier, as though he had risen through the floor, and was ready at a moment's notice to vanish again into the nothingness from which he had sprung.

Gladys was transfixed, speechless and breathless, not doubting that it was a disembodied spirit which she saw before her.

But the spell lifted the next moment, when the form, with the unquestionable tread of a living person, advanced several steps and seated itself in a chair a few feet from the lady.

As he did so, he pronounced the single word,

"Gladys!"

The voice broke the awful chain by which the lady was held. The floodgates were loosed, and her soul outflowed.

Leaning forward, she extended her arms, and in low, passionate tones wailed:

"Oh, uncle! I saw you under my window! Why did you not speak to me? I feared it was your spirit that had come to warn me of your death. How came you here? How came I

here? Make clear these horrible doings! What would they have with me? Speak, speak, speak! for my heart is breaking!"

"Gladys, from the bottom of my heart, I pity you! I am not an apparition, and I am not your Uncle Tudor!"

"Not my Uncle Tudor!" gasped the astounded Gladys; "surely you are jesting, or my senses have left me."

"I am not jesting, nor are your senses playing you false. I repeat I am not your Uncle Tudor!"

"In the name of Heaven, who are you?" asked the maiden, shrinking back in her chair and withdrawing her extended arms.

"I am his twin brother Warren; for years I have lived in this place and have never been out of sight of this building; I am a hopeless invalid; your uncle comes to see me at long intervals."

"But I have never heard him speak of you."

"No, and probably you never will; a baleful shadow rests on our past lives, and my brother never mentions me to any one; it has been so understood between us since the terrible pall fell across our threshold. You would never have heard of it now, but for your presence at Oak Hall."

"And why am I here? Why was I decoyed from my home last night? What do they intend to do with me? How long am I to stay here? Tell me, oh, tell me, what all this dreadful mystery means."

The words came fast and fierce from the lips of Gladys, who leaned forward again in her anguish, as though she would clasp the knees of the grave-looking person in front of her.

His manner was in impressive contrast to hers. He was cool and slow of speech, seeming to weigh each word as it was uttered, while, all the time, his burning gaze was fixed upon her. He appeared absolutely to feel no emotion whatever.

So grave and impassive indeed was he, that at times a shivering thrill passed over the young lady at the thought that after all it was not real flesh and blood that was holding converse with her.

There was something so uncanny in his appearance and manner, that the feeling was warranted, though by a great effort she was able to shake it off.

Pausing in her impassioned questions, she waited for his reply.

But he remained silent, with his penetrating gaze riveted upon her face.

"When did you see my uncle last?" she asked, seeking to break the oppressive restraint.

"Many days have passed and many more will come and go before we shall look upon each other again; why do you ask?"

"Oh Uncle Warren, I do not know what to think or say; I implore you to clear up this frightful mystery. Tell me why I was brought here and what fate is in store for me."

The answer to these agonized questions came at last, prefaced however, by the singular inquiry:

"Gladys, do you love your Uncle Carew?"

"Do I love him? I would lay down my life this moment to save him from any suffering."

"Spoken like the noble girl that you are and that I have often heard him declare you to be! You say you would do anything to save him pain, even to the laying down of your life?"

"Gladly, eagerly would I do so."

"It is in your power to save him from disgrace, from wretchedness and from a shameful death; but you will not be asked to yield your life to do that."

"You take away my breath! You mystify me more than ever!"

"Gladys, do you love Fred Melville?"

The dim illumination in the room hardly concealed the tell-tale flush that overspread the beautiful countenance, as she softly murmured:

"He has my heart and I have his; we love each other, deeply, truly, devotedly, unreservedly."

"Would you be willing to give him up to save your uncle from the most terrible fate that can befall a human being?"

A moan of anguish surged from the bleeding heart of the poor girl and she leaned forward as if about to faint; but, by a supreme effort, she recovered herself and remained upright in her chair.

"Are you sure the sacrifice is necessary?" she asked, in a weak, pitiful voice.

"It is; but you are distressed more than I supposed you would be. Rest quiet until the morrow—you will not be disturbed. I will see you again, and everything shall be made clear. Good-night."

She scarcely saw or heard him as he rose and softly passed out of the room, leaving her alone in her unspeakable sorrow and desolation.

CHAPTER XI.

A SOLITARY HORSEMAN.

IN the rush of events we must not lose sight of one individual whose concern in these occurrences was as deep, profound and soul-stirring as the human heart is capable of feeling.

From the moment the fearful truth of the abduction of his beloved broke upon him, Fred

Melville had not closed an eye in sleep nor had he been quiet in body; his mind was in a whirl, which at times threatened to play havoc with his wits.

Without waiting for the help of the local officers and the detectives who, he understood, were summoned at once from New York, he set about investigating the business for himself. It was the only relief for his surcharged emotions.

Quackery sometimes succeeds where science fails, and stupidity often strikes the truth at the first fire, while the most skilled aim goes wide of the mark.

As soon as Fred was able to think with something like coolness, he set about the task of tracing his beloved.

As for the fortune that had been abstracted from the vaults of the Asheville Bank, he cared nothing for that; it did not have a feather's weight against the peril of Gladys.

There was little that could be done during the remaining hours of the night, but on the morrow, bright and early, he was at work.

He secured a leave of absence from the bank, and, without calling to his aid any person, and without making any inquiry as to what the officials were doing, he went at his task with the enthusiastic vigor of one who is determined to win or die in the effort.

His first natural act was to hunt up the messenger boys that had delivered the respective messages to him and Gladys.

They were readily found, but the result, it need hardly be said, was similar to those of the detectives, Zigzag and Cutt Whitney.

He next set out to trace the carriage and driver. Zigzag had been before him in this effort, and since he made a total failure of it, it was not in the nature of things that young Fred Melville should do any better.

During all this period, Fred fortunately remained unsuspecting of the web which fate was weaving about him in connection with the robbery of the bank.

The fact that the team, carriage and driver could not be traced was proof that they did not belong in Asheville; they must have come from a distance.

It was easily established that no suspicious strangers had left by the single railway station in Asheville.

The replies to the messages sent by the authorities to the adjacent stations and towns failed to bring back the least information respecting them.

The discouraging truth seemed established that an unknown carriage had entered and departed from Asheville, taking Gladys Linden in it, and whither it had gone was the troublesome problem that remained to be solved.

There were fully a dozen avenues by which a vehicle could leave the town, and since it might stop within five or ten miles or continue its flight for fifty, it will be seen that the task of all parties concerned was of an herculean nature.

Zigzag was not able to find a person who had seen the carriage after it had gone a hundred yards from Ravenswood the night before.

He found plenty who claimed to have seen it, but a little ingenious questioning convinced Uncle Peleg that they were falsifying.

What more torturing situation of body and mind than that of the devoted champion, eager to strike the needed blow for his beloved, and yet who does not know where to deliver it?

The thought was maddening that Gladys was in the power of some conscienceless miscreants, and that neither Fred nor any of her friends could raise a finger effectively to help her.

But they could try to do so, and try they did with a will.

Yielding to one of those unaccountable fancies which sometimes take possession of us, Fred Melville visited New York in the hope, rather than the belief that some trace of the robbers and abductors could be secured there.

A couple of hours spent with the inspectors and the vigilant superintendent of the Police Department convinced him that he had gone thither upon a Quixotic errand, for the officials whose business it was to trace out crime in all its lurking-places, were sure to perform that duty infinitely better than could a stranger to the city as well as to the profession.

By nightfall, Fred was back in Asheville, impatient with himself that he had given way to a whim that never promised any success.

The one comforting truth that he learned was that the most competent detectives money could procure were engaged in the business, and that if success was possible, they could be counted upon to gain it.

It was not unnatural for the devoted lover to attribute the abduction of Gladys to the infatuation of more than one party. Since she was the most lovely, the most fascinating, the most irresistible lady that ever graced the earth with her presence, it was inevitable that others should hold the same glowing faith.

"I do believe," he added to himself, with a short, passionate gasp, "that, if I could get her in no other way, I would steal and run off with her, just as the knights used to do in the olden times."

It was growing dark when Fred, having fin-

ished his tea, bade his parents good-by for a time and walked in the direction of Mr. Carew's house. He had inquired in the morning after him, but was unable to see him, and he felt that it was his duty to call and pay his respects; besides which he wished to learn whether the old gentleman had received any news for him.

In answer to his inquiries, he was told that the bank president did not feel well. He was suffering from the excitement caused by a prolonged interview in the afternoon. He hoped he would be able to see his young friend on the morrow, but it would be hardly prudent to do so that evening.

Leaving his regards and best wishes, Fred turned about and came through the gate upon the street again.

He had walked but a few steps, when he came face to face with an honest-looking old farmer who was gaping right and left, through his spectacles, as though he had never seen such a thing as street lamps and a town of several thousand inhabitants.

"Good-evening," said the stranger, with that politeness which leads a man living in the country to speak to every one whom he meets; "can you tell me where Mr. Tooter Caroo lives?"

"In that house yonder," courteously replied Fred Melville; "I have just called and he is too ill to see any one."

"Wal, I'll be consarned!" muttered Uncle Peleg; "I've had the blamest luck ever since I struck this old town."

"What did you want of him?" asked Fred, glad of the relief of a little by-play like that which was promised.

"His cousin used to know my brother-in-law, up in New Hampshire, and before I go back home, I thought I would call and spend two or three days with him. If he don't feel well, I don't s'pose it would be best to stop in, would it?"

"Hardly," replied Fred, smiling at the assurance of the simple-hearted old gentleman.

"They charge so all-fired much at the hotel, that it would save me a good deal if I could bunk in with him, but the place looks so grand," added Uncle Peleg, glancing with an awed look of admiration at the fine residence, "that I'm afraid that I wouldn't feel to hum. Wal, good-night," and the old fellow moved on, while Fred, not a little entertained by his simplicity, continued his walk in the direction of his own home.

"It is the second night of her disappearance," mused the lover, sinking again into his fearful dejection of spirits, "and not the first knowledge has been gained of her. Oh, where is she at this minute? Is she alive or dead? If alive, what does she think of me who ought to be at her side, risking my life for her? Why am I so bound and helpless, when she needs my strong arm and sustaining love in her awful extremity?"

Fred had walked but a short distance, when it occurred to him that he had not inquired of the servant whether her master had received any news of his missing niece.

He was yet in the neighborhood of the house, and he stopped, undecided whether he ought to go back or defer his call until the morrow.

The young man's situation was such that he was in full view of the building and the front room in which the prostrated man lay. The curtain was up, so that a partial sight of the interior was obtained.

Looking up at the side window, Fred was surprised to see a figure move across the room. It was that of a man, fully dressed and attired in a long overcoat buttoned to his chin.

Approaching the window, he glanced out, as if to assure himself of the state of the weather. His action disclosed his face, as shown by the bright gas which illuminated the room.

The man was Tudor Carew, President of the Asheville Bank.

"That's a curious proceeding for a sick man," was the natural thought of Fred Melville; "he must have recovered very suddenly."

The spectator took a couple of steps, with the purpose of questioning him when he came out, but checked himself.

"It may be he doesn't wish to see me; I'll wait."

Mr. Carew, having satisfied himself regarding the weather, drew down the curtain and vanished from sight.

The street, as we have said, was one of the most quiet and retired in Asheville. In the profound stillness of the night, the watcher and listener heard the slightest sounds.

Thus he distinctly caught the noise made by the opening and closing of one of the rear doors of the dwelling; then he heard the brisk step of some one, and then, after a moment's silence, the clomp of a horse's hoofs over the sodded carriageway, which ran alongside the building and connected the barn and stables of Mr. Carew with the public highway.

This was always open and without a gate, so that his carriage and horses could enter and depart without delay.

Suddenly the sound of the hoofs changed to that made by a horse trotting, quickly changing again to those of an animal on the gallop.

The next minute, a horse, bearing a man on

his back, galloped to view, and, wheeling to the right, headed toward the open country, which was the direction taken a few minutes before by Uncle Peleg.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD.

FRED MELVILLE was astounded. Only a few minutes before, he had been turned from the door of Tudor Carew, President of the Asheville Bank, by the message that that gentleman was too ill to see any one, and here, right before his eyes, he saw the same person gallop down the road, as though starting upon a long ride in the clear, bracing autumn night.

"What need was there of his using such deception?" was the natural question which the young man asked himself; "if he didn't wish to see me, he had only to say so. But where can he be going at this hour?"

While pondering over the matter, Fred walked slowly in the direction taken by Uncle Peleg a short time before. Thus he passed by the house of Mr. Carew, and perhaps a hundred yards beyond, when he became aware that a person was standing under the shadow of a large, overhanging oak at the side of the path, as if waiting for him.

The young man was armed, and, since he had entered upon this dangerous business, he had grown suspicious. He placed his hand at his hip to make sure that his revolver was there.

As he withdrew his hand, he was close enough to recognize the honest-looking farmer, from whom he parted but a short while before.

"Good-evening again," said the elder heartily, "I hardly expected the pleasure of meeting you so soon."

This certainly was Uncle Peleg, but his manner of speech was so altered that Fred stopped in surprise and stared at him.

The other indulged in a quiet, chuckling laugh.

"I know why you are astonished," he said, "but I will make it plain; walk with me a few steps in the direction taken by our sick friend, Mr. Tudor Carew, President of the Asheville Bank. I have something to say, Frederic Melville, which I think will interest you."

"My gracious! you have not only interested, but you have mystified me already."

Again Uncle Peleg indulged in his quiet laugh and, slipping his arm within that of his younger companion, gave it a mischievous pinch.

"You took me for a simple-minded old farmer, I know," he added in a guarded voice looking to the right and left as if afraid of being overheard, "but I ain't."

"I am sure of that, but who are you?"

"A detective from New York, engaged in trying to find the whereabouts of your special friend, Miss Gladys Linden."

Fred Melville stopped and stared at the speaker like one thunderstruck. Could it be possible?

"You are the only man in Asheville to whom I have made myself known, and, with one exception, the only person who suspects my identity; I am sure you understand the necessity of keeping what I have told and shall tell you a secret."

Having recovered his self-command, the awed Fred Melville, said:

"I cannot tell you the pleasure it gives me to meet you; I don't wonder that no one suspects your identity."

"One of the elemental laws of our profession is never to make our identity known, so long as it is possible to conceal it. I had no intention of doing so in this instance, and I am entirely selfish in my reason for taking the step."

"How is that?"

"We are both engaged in the same task and our paths are sure to converge; I don't wish them to cross, as they have already done so more than once. The result promises to be more satisfactory if we come to an understanding at the opening of the campaign."

"I shall be only too glad to give you the utmost help I can."

"Which promises to be infinitesimal; nevertheless, as I have said, we must join forces."

"I am more than willing to do that; I have been at work ever since I discovered that Miss Linden was missing."

"With what result?"

"None."

"And mine is about the same, but while there's life there's hope. You recognized that gentleman who rode by on a swinging gallop a few minutes ago?"

"He was Mr. Carew."

"Do you know who his physician is?"

"Yes—why?"

"I should like to engage him; a doctor who can bring his patients around in such short order is too valuable to mankind to suffer his light to be hidden under a bushel; I should like to engage him."

And the detective chuckled at his own joke, adding more seriously:

"Where do you suppose he has gone?"

"I haven't the slightest idea; it looks as if he had started out for a ride in this brisk autumn air."

"Depend upon it, when Mr. Carew sets out on horseback in such haste, it is business and not pleasure on which he is engaged. This is not the first time he has left home for an indefinite absence."

"In the same way?"

"Not necessarily. Do you know whether he is in the habit of leaving town for several days at a time?"

"Yes; he does; he generally goes to Boston, on business connected with the bank or some of his speculations."

"How often?"

The relations between Fred Melville and the niece of the bank president gave him opportunities for learning all that was needed to answer this question.

"He generally goes away once a month—rarely oftener and is absent sometimes two or three days and occasionally a week; indeed I recall that he has been absent now and then for more than a week."

"And where did you say he went?"

"To Boston, *always*."

"Humph! he hasn't been in Boston for years."

"How do you know that?" asked the amazed Fred Melville, looking in the honest face at his side, which never appeared more guileless than then with the moonlight falling upon it.

"Never mind; suffice that I know what I say; he has spent most of his time in New York, and on several occasions, he has stayed where he is going to spend this night."

Fred Melville could only look his amazement. He was tempted for a moment to believe the man at his side was jesting with him, but the next moment he knew he spoke the truth.

"The trail is growing warm," added Zigzag, as if speaking to himself, but still keeping his arm within that of his young friend, who had formed a strong admiration for him; "shall I tell you the next step we must take?"

"Certainly."

"We must find where he has gone to-night."

"What a pity one of us hadn't a horse so as to follow him."

"It would not have answered; the task of following a man on horseback over a lonely country road without detection is almost impossible. We couldn't do it."

"How then shall it be done?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"You are in need of sleep; go home and get a good night's rest; to-morrow your wits will be fresh and bright; come to the hotel after dinner time, go up to room 73 where you will find Uncle Peleg, (that is if nothing unforeseen occurs) and let me know all that you know. Now, we will turn about and go back home."

Uncle Peleg had a way that was resistless and Fred Melville obeyed him like a child. They conversed familiarly, but in guarded tones, ceasing altogether when they encountered any person, for naturally numbers were abroad at that hour.

At the corner of the street, they separated with the expectation of seeing each other on the morrow as agreed upon.

Waiting until sure that his young friend was beyond sight, the detective wheeled about abruptly and started back over the same route that he had just traveled.

He had no expectation of spending a minute in sleep that night.

He had seen Tudor Carew, the bank president ride on horseback into the open country, and he meant to follow him.

True, he was at great disadvantage. He was on foot and he had no means of knowing whether the other had ridden a half-mile or a dozen miles. But anything was preferable to his going to the hotel and spending the hours in idleness.

He walked briskly, only slowing his gait to one more in consonance with his character, when he observed some one approaching from the opposite direction.

A brief walk brought him opposite the house of Mr. Carew. He glanced up at the window, and slackened his pace, on the watch as ever for what he might see or hear.

A bright light was still shining in the room and the curtain of one of the front windows was raised.

He looked upward, half expecting to see the owner of the home, but no one showed himself. No person being in sight along the street, the detective hastened his steps, and in a shorter time than he anticipated, reached the outskirts of the town.

At the same brisk walk he soon penetrated the country proper, and then assumed a gait which few men could have surpassed or equaled.

There was nothing striking in the appearance of the section through which he was making his way. Broad fields stretched on either hand, here and there were patches of woods, none of them of any extent, occasionally a little spread of water on the right or left, the streams into which they narrowed being crossed by rude bridges, while at intervals the twinkling lights across the landscape showed where some tiller of the soil made his home.

The sky was almost unclouded, so that the moon, which was nearly full, gave all the light

that could be needed, and indeed more than the officer wished to have.

The objectionable feature of this state of things was that while he could see so plainly, other persons could discern him at a greater distance than might be pleasant.

Zigzag had walked fully a mile, and was swinging along with the same speed, not forgetting to look to the rear as well as to the front. In truth, he would have been a poor detective had he failed to note every avenue of approach.

Twice, when he looked about, he fancied he saw a couple of dark figures some distance behind him. A pause and a keen scrutiny led him to conclude, however, that it was some figment of the imagination instead of a reality.

But he did not relax his watchfulness, and so it came about that before he had gone a fourth of a mile further, the startling fact was indisputable that two men were following him.

While the detective was seeking to shadow a single party, two others were shadowing him.

He was not alarmed, but impatient, because an annoying complication was thus threatened.

"A row is impending as sure as fate," was his conclusion, and, as usual, Zigzag was right.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

It is anything but pleasant to awaken to the fact that, while pursuing your way over a lonely road at night, you are followed by two strangers, whose actions indicate that they mean business of a serious character as concerns you.

As we have stated, it cannot be said that Zigzag the detective felt anything in the nature of personal fear, for he had been in far more perilous situations than this threatened to be, and it goes without saying that he was always heeled for such hostile meetings. His previous experience was marked by some of the most desperate encounters in which a person can be engaged, and his body was well scarred with the mementoes of such strife.

But we have intimated the real cause of the officer's annoyance. Up to this moment, he had believed that his character and business in Asheville was unsuspected by any one besides Cutt Whitney and young Fred Melville, to whom he had made himself known only a short time before.

So long as this was the case, it will be perceived that he possessed a vast advantage; but he feared, that, yielding to a peculiar waggishness which was a part of his nature, he had gone too far with his assumed character of a verdant New England farmer and had drawn suspicion to himself by the very means that was meant to avert it.

Now should it prove that enemies had suspected his identity or rather his business, they would take means to baffle his movements, thereby rendering his success ten-fold more problematical.

True, he could change his character and make-up, but most of the difficulty would remain, since the fact could not be concealed that a detective was at work in Asheville, where nearly every man knew every other man.

But all this reasoning was based on the theory that the two men at the rear were really shadowing him. The possibility remained that they might be a couple of countrymen who did not dream of anything of the kind.

Had the discovery taken place near a stretch of woods, Zigzag might have made use of the shelter thus offered, but he could see nothing of the kind in front, and even had he done so, the concealment of himself would rather postpone than remove the trouble.

With characteristic promptness, Zigzag determined on his line of action.

Instead of increasing his gait, he slowed it so as to give the strangers an opportunity to come up with him without putting forth any special effort.

He anticipated the result correctly. The pursuers were walking fast and rapidly came up with him.

He sauntered along, as though unaware that they were behind him; but all the same, he kept a sharp watch of the rear.

When the men were within a hundred feet, Uncle Peleg, as he still assumed to be, deliberately stopped, and standing sideways after the manner of a social countryman, called out in a cheery voice:

"Good-evening! a right nice night!"

The individuals addressed made no response, and without appearing to do so, Uncle Peleg narrowly scanned them as they came up.

There was nothing specially noteworthy in their appearance, except that they closely resembled each other.

They were of ordinary height, well dressed, and each wore a large mustache. One was swinging a slender elastic cane, which he sometimes whirled swiftly, using it as a toy, while walking.

During the brief period that Uncle Peleg studied them, he did his utmost to learn whether he had ever seen them before.

He had no remembrance of having done so, which might be the case if he had encountered them several times.

Each wore a Derby hat, but the mustaches

might have been false, or the men might have shaved their faces clear of all beard since meeting him.

Nothing but a survey by daylight could settle the question of identity.

"Good-evening," repeated Uncle Peleg as they came up; "I spoke a minute ago, but I reckon you didn't hear me."

"Good evening," replied one of them gruffly, "what are you waiting for?"

"Seein' as how you was comin', I thought I would wait and have your company, but you seem to feel so mighty peart about it, you can go on alone for all I keer, be hanged to you!"

And he stood still for them to pass by.

But they were not to be caught in that fashion.

Seeing that the old gentleman was miffed, both broke into a laugh, and the one who had spoken so brusquely added in something like a cheery tone:

"We didn't hear you at first, pop, or rather we didn't think it was such a green-looking pumpkin as you."

All this was well enough, but Uncle Peleg didn't like the action of the couple as all resumed their walk. They separated so as to bring him between them.

Still he could not very well resent the movement, for to do so would have shown a distrust which he could not explain without deepening their suspicion of him.

So he advanced, as though he felt no objection, but it need not be said that every sense was on the alert.

"Where are you goin'?" asked one of the strangers.

"Goin' hum; where did you s'pose?"

"Where do you live?"

"At the cross-roads, about a mile out."

"What's your name?"

"Phosh Draper; what's your names and where be you goin'?" asked the old farmer in turn.

"Oh, we're a couple of lightning-rod agents on our way out to our aunts."

"Where does she live?"

"At Squedunk; do you know her?"

"Pshaw now, you're foolin'," said Uncle Peleg reproachfully, glancing from right to the left.

That glance, instinctive as it may be called, made evident the fact that the fellow on his left was walking slower than the other. As a consequence, he was falling behind.

There was nothing to be gained by trifling, and Uncle Peleg concluded to take the bull by the horns.

"See here," said he, coming abruptly to a halt; "if either of you chaps want to have my company, why walk alongside of me like a man; but I won't have any dog sneaking at my heels—"

With a movement like that of a panther, the one who had dropped a step or two to the rear made a bound at Uncle Peleg.

Alert and watchful as was the latter, he was unprepared for this demonstration, and was, therefore, caught off his guard.

His assailant came down with crushing force upon his shoulders and flung his arms about his neck.

Only by a prodigious effort did Uncle Peleg save himself from being overcome; but calling into play his great wrestling skill, he ducked his head like a bucking broncho and flung his enemy headlong over his shoulders.

There would have been little difficulty in disposing of this scamp, but for the second one who, as may be supposed, was not idle. The moment he saw his partner's sprawling legs pointing toward the moon, he dealt Uncle Peleg a blow across the forehead with the butt of his pistol which sent him reeling backward to the earth.

As he was going, with his brain in a whirl, Zigzag made a terrific lunge at the man who had struck him, delivering a blow which, in turn, sent the other spinning backward to the ground.

Realizing his peril, the detective summoned all his will-power with a view of keeping his feet and senses, but the effort was beyond his strength and he went down limp as a rag.

"Now we've got him!" exclaimed the assailant, who had taken a flying leap over the head of the officer. "It's Zigzag, as sure as you live, Jack!"

"Let's go through him before we finish him, Matt," added the other, smarting from the blow which had hurled him fully a dozen feet. "I shouldn't wonder if we might find some documents about his clothes that will be of use to us."

The two were bending over the prostrate officer, with whom it looked as if it must go ill, when the sharp report of a pistol rung out in the stillness, and the form of a stranger burst upon the scene.

"You cowards!" he exclaimed in a fury; "to attack a man when he is helpless!"

That the miscreants deserved the epithet applied to them was proven by the events of the next minute.

Having discharged one chamber of his weapon, the new arrival aimed a blow at the assailant nearest him, which, had it landed, would

have cracked his skull; but with inimitable dexterity the intended victim dodged, and, in a crouching position, he turned and ran with his utmost speed down the highway.

His partner was but a few paces behind him, both skurrying off like a couple of frightened deer.

The man fired two shots after them, but the distance was too great to be effective, and the fugitives continued their flight until they vanished in the moonlight.

The stranger gave them no further attention, but bent over the form on the ground.

The detective was already recovering from the fierce blow he had received, and began slowly and uncertainly rising to his feet.

"Helloa, Uncle Peleg, it looks as if you had run against something very hard; I hope you are not badly hurt."

The officer stared at his friend, and with a wan smile and slow utterance, asked:

"Is that you, Melville? I did get a pretty good crack, and no mistake. How is it that you are here?"

"I suspect the same errand brought me that brought you."

"That being the case, let's shake."

The two warmly grasped hands, as if they were friends of years' standing, instead of barely a single hour.

The detective rapidly rallied from his collapse, but a big swelling remained over one of his eyes, as a reminder of the attention received from the butt of the pistol.

"They went off in such a hurry that they forgot something," remarked Fred Melville, stooping over and picking up the pistol that had done the work, from where it lay gleaming in the moonlight; "allow me to present this to you, Uncle Peleg, as a memento of the stirring events of to-night."

"I am pleased to accept the same," replied the officer, rubbing his forehead smartly, and carefully replacing his broad-brimmed hat, which had fallen off in the affray.

"It looks as if you will be troubled for a short time with the common complaint known as swelled head," said Fred, with a laugh.

"No doubt of it, but I'm thankful it's no worse. Melville, I must say that your arrival could not have been more timely, but, all the same, I'm half disposed to regret to find you thus far from Asheville at this time of night."

CHAPTER XIV.

POSTING THE BOOKS.

It is necessary, in order to keep the thread of our story, that we should go back a few hours in our record of the incidents crowding upon us.

It will be remembered that on the afternoon of the evening preceding Uncle Peleg's rough adventure just described, he and Cutt Whitney, his associate detective, sat in an upper room of the principal hotel discussing the piece of cipher writing which the former had translated.

Without repeating the list of figures, we may recall their interpretation which was:

"Next Thursday night. Meet at O. H. Other game fixed. Three in this; two in that. T."

"Since I have straightened out the figures into words," remarked Zigzag, "of course you will have no difficulty in catching the full meaning of the words themselves."

"I am no so sure of that," laughed Whitney, taking the paper and scanning it, as though he expected to discover something more of its hidden meaning.

Zigzag said nothing during the few minutes his friend spent in scrutinizing the cipher.

Suddenly Whitney looked up.

"Yesterday was Thursday, so it is clear that this bit of writing or rather figuring was penciled before that day, and it refers to the robbery of the Asheville bank; do you agree with me?"

"I do."

"O. H." is the appointed rendezvous of the criminals, but whether they are to meet there before or after the burglary is the question—

"Since they must meet in order to carry out their scheme, nothing in the nature of that paper was necessary to provide for the meetings afterward."

"True, I ought to have thought of that. Then it was arranged that the scamps were to meet at 'O. H.' from which point they were to set out to execute their double crime."

"What about the rest of the note?"

"The expression which follows is one of those that are liable to ambiguity since authorities do not agree as to its precise use, but we have a key which makes the meaning clear. 'Three in this,' must refer to the burglars, since we know that three were engaged in that robbery, while the 'two' means that that number was employed in the abduction of Miss Linden."

"You have expressed my views," remarked Zigzag, admiring the cleverness of his friend. "What is your idea of the expression 'other game fixed'?"

"I am not clear as to that; it means either the burglary or the abduction, but I see no means of making certain which."

"I suspect it bears upon the abduction, but it

is a small matter either way, and is not worth the trouble of speculating upon. I would give a good deal, however, to know whom that letter 'T' represents."

"It is a pity that two initials were not employed, instead of one, for there is no estimating the number of names that begin with T."

"If other initials were added, it is more than likely they would be fictitious; so I don't see that much is to be gained by theorizing over that. It seems to me, however, that between you and me there ought to be some way of hitting upon the translation of 'O. H.'"

"There's one thing certain, we can't do it by sitting here and figuring over the matter," said Whitney, rising to his feet.

Zigzag had taken the paper again, and was scrutinizing the figures with so much interest that his friend, looking down upon him, asked:

"Do you expect to find anything else?"

"Do you know," asked Zigzag, looking up in the face of his friend, "that the worst thing about this Greek cipher, as we may call it, is that it is composed entirely of figures?"

"How is that?"

"If it was made up of script, you would have the handwriting of some person, and no matter how skillfully it was disguised, there would be something to work upon. It is different with figures, where there cannot be so much character."

"But there are so many persons who show almost as much individuality in their style of figures as they do in their handwriting."

Instead of replying to this remark, Zigzag deliberately inserted his half-smoked cigar between his lips, and looked in the face of Cutt Whitney, who had seated himself on the side of the bed.

There was a world of significance in the smile and twinkle of the bright, clear eyes.

And Cutt Whitney "caught on."

That smile and look said as plainly as words could have done:

"You are right; there is an individuality in these figures, as much indeed as there is in the handwriting of the person who made them; such being the case, you have now a clew to work upon."

Whitney carefully refolded the bit of paper that had passed back and forth between them several times, and put it in his pocket-book. While doing so he looked thoughtfully out of the window.

"Cutt," said Zigzag, tipping his chair back in an easy position, crossing his legs and clasping his hands behind his head, while he spoke with his cigar between his teeth, "you are in luck; you have got more than I to work upon."

"Explain, Sir Oracle."

"Besides knowing the number of burglars concerned (as I do the number taking part in the abduction), you have a lot of figures showing such individuality that, wherever you may come across a half-dozen made by the same hand, you can identify them at a glance."

"If a man can disguise his handwriting, can he not change his method of forming figures?"

"He can, but he don't."

"I'm inclined to think you are right and now, if I only knew where to look for the companion figures to these!"

"Cutt," said Zigzag, with mock seriousness, "you are becoming selfish and avaricious. The next thing you will want the Central Park and the remaining funds in the vaults of the Asheville Bank. I know well enough where I would begin an examination of the formation of the figures."

"And I know the place you mean; I shall go there at once; good-by. I'll knock at your door when I get the chance."

And Cutt Whitney passed out the room downstairs and straight to the Asheville Bank.

The prodigious loss which the institution had suffered made it necessary to close the doors for a day or two until arrangements could be made for continuing the business. A large number of people were gathered in the street outside, talking in low tones, looking up at the front of the brick building in an awed expectant way, as though they expected to see some solution of the identity of the burglars emerge from the solid walls.

No one besides a privileged few were allowed to come inside, for otherwise the place would have been overrun by those having naught but simple curiosity to draw them thither.

The detective's knock was recognized and he was admitted with little delay.

"Good day, My Hyneman," he said addressing the cashier; "have you found out the total?"

"Not precisely but enough to know that it is rising two hundred thousand."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Yes; they made a pretty clean sweep, but I guess the directors will be able to pull through. There is to be a meeting to-morrow for the purpose of taking steps toward shaping up things. It would have been called to-day but for the illness of Mr. Carew."

"I believe you, and a friend tried the doors last night at the very time the burglars were inside."

"So it seems; Mr. Foster and I like most of

the town were at Ravenswood. He complained of a headache, and we took a stroll together. I led the way to the bank. As we were passing, a whim seized me to learn whether Martin the watchman was on the alert. The register showed more than once that he had been indulging in a nap, when he ought to have been making the rounds, so I tried the door and called him by name.

"Did you notice nothing suspicious?"

"Nothing. Had I the least thought of anything being wrong, I might have paid more attention to the confederate on the outside, who kept his face turned away as we met and passed each other."

"Have you any idea of the hour when you passed the bank?"

Mr. Hyneman was silent a minute while he tried to refresh his memory.

"I cannot be certain, but I think it was near two o'clock."

"Could your companion fix upon the time with more positiveness than you?"

"I am quite sure he could not, for about all he thought or talked about was his racking headache. He could only do as I have done—guess at it."

"Why do you name the hour of two as the proper time?"

"I only give my impression; I do not say positively that that was the exact time; for aught I know I may be away off. Is there any other way I can be of service to you, since I am of so little help in this direction?"

"I would like the privilege of looking into your bookkeeper's ledger."

Any of the bank books would have suited as well as this, but the detective gave a particular name, hoping that the cashier would not divine his real purpose.

"Of course," replied the official, hastening to comply with the request; "it was a mistake to let him off to-day, for we are in great need of his services."

"I doubt whether he would have been of any use to you; since he is so broken up over the disappearance of Miss Linden."

"Dreadful affair, wasn't it? Can't understand what it all means; what is the world coming to? What do you make of it, Mr. Whitney?"

"It's beyond my ken, though I shouldn't wonder if they intend to hold her for a ransom."

"Impossible! this is the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and we are living in a civilized land."

"And therefore what I say is the more probable. However, it is useless to speculate upon it. You know that everything is being done that is possible."

"I am glad to know that. Poor Mr. Carew! my heart bleeds for him. He will be a heavy loser, because of this burglary, but that is nothing compared with the loss of his niece to whom he is as much attached as if she were his own daughter."

The voluble cashier ceased, for he saw that Whitney was poring carefully through the ledger, as if deeply interested in what he saw, which was the case.

It has been said that there was an individuality in the formation of the figures composing the cipher which the detective Zigzag translated for his friend. This was so marked, that if the mannerism was not a disguise of itself, it would be observed at a glance when seen elsewhere.

One hasty examination of the first page was enough; there was the same style of figures precisely that composed the cipher writing.

The resemblance was absolute; there could be no possible mistake.

The heart of the detective was heavy with the most genuine regret he had felt in a long time.

"Alas! despite everything that can be said in favor of Fred Melville he was one of the bank burglars."

CHAPTER XV.

"O. H."

HAD the Asheville Bank been entered in the regular way, that is to say had it been actually broken into, the task of Detective Whitney would have been considerably simplified.

The most noted bank-breakers of the country have an individual style of their own, which can be identified by many of the leading detectives when they make a thorough investigation. The particular kind of tools employed, the manner of opening the vaults and safe, and the other little peculiarities of handiwork frequently enable the officers to name the very parties guilty of the unlawful act.

But in the case we have under consideration, nothing of the kind took place. The burglars possessed the usual and decisive advantage of the combination which gave them access to the treasure. There was not a lock broken, a blow struck, a chisel employed, an ounce of gunpowder touched off, a wedge or bar used, nor indeed any means other than that resorted to by the cashier of the institution when he assumed charge at the opening of bank hours.

Nor did the minutest examination of the vault and the interior of the bank bring to light any-

thing that could help the careful searcher after the truth.

The club with which Budge Martin, the watchman, was knocked bleeding to the floor, was the only thing picked up. That was an ordinary stick of hard wood, without the slightest mark by which to identify it.

Studiously hiding his emotion from the cashier, Detective Whitney talked to him about unimportant matters for several minutes, took another look at the vault, and then bidding him good-day, passed out of the bank and made his way to the hotel.

He was looking for Zigzag, or Uncle Peleg, as he had come to be known in Asheville; but, as is generally the case, at the time he wanted most to see him, he was invisible. He searched everywhere, and even ventured upon several inquiries, but of no avail.

He desired, above everything, to consult with him over the discovery he had made about the authorship of the cipher which Zigzag had translated for him.

Finally, he was compelled to give it up.

"I'll probably meet him at the supper-table," was his conclusion.

But, again he was disappointed; Uncle Peleg perversely remained out of sight, until the impatient officer half-suspected he was doing so on purpose.

We have made the statement that the most brilliant successes of our famous detectives are often due to accident, though they are the last persons in the world to admit that such is the fact.

Cutt Whitney slowly ate his evening meal, in anything but a pleasant frame of mind, which was increased by the chatter of a couple of dandified-looking young gentlemen, who were recounting their exploits on their bicycles or "bikes," as those vehicles have now come to be known.

"It was the sharpest race, Dolph, don't you know, that we've had since we got our new machines."

"Yes," replied his young friend across the table. "I'll own I had to work pretty hard, don't you know, to beat you."

"And it was a mighty small beat you made too, don't you know? If it hadn't been for that header I took just this side of Oak Hall, I'd been with you all the way back, don't you know?"

"I ain't so sure of that; we'll try it again some day."

"The roads are in a good condition, don't you know, and, if it doesn't rain to-night, I'll take a spin with you in the morning. Don't you know that the morning is the best time for a spin, Gus?"

"I'm agreed; is it a go?"

"It is," and the challenge was accepted.

Thus the talk went on after the tired detective left the table, withdrew to the bar-room, and lit a cigar.

Cutt Whitney had taken two puffs of the weed when he almost sprung to his feet.

"By the great Caesar," he muttered, "one of those nincompoops spoke of 'Oak Hall.' Whatever or wherever that place may be, its initials are the same as those on this slip of paper in my pocket."

To make sure, he drew out the cipher, and the table by which Zigzag had explained its meaning.

"Yes, beyond all question one of the sentences was, 'Meet at O. H.'"

There remained the possibility that the reference might be to some other locality altogether, but Whitney was so sure he was on the right track at last that he could hardly repress a disposition to indulge in whistling a lively jig.

But men in his profession learn to hold themselves well in hand, and no one of the loungers in the bar-room would have suspected that anything had happened to cause an additional pulse-beat on the part of the stranger who was leisurely smoking a cigar.

"Can you tell me how far it is to Oak Hall?" he asked in an off-hand manner of a countryman seated on his left.

"The latter looked inquiringly at him and said:

"Oak Hall? I never heard tell of no sich place."

But he spoke loud that several others, sitting near caught the words.

"Never heard of Oak Hall?" repeated one of them; "why, 'Shah, your memory must be totterin'. You and me have driv by the place more times than you've got fingers and toes."

"So we hev," said Josiah in a shame-faced way; "I must have been thinkin' of something else to let it slip my mind; why, partner," he added, facing toward the inquirer, "as near as I can figure, Oak Hall is about ten mile out on the Beaver town road." Am I right, Ben?

"That's about the size of it, though it's a scant ten mile."

Detective Whitney felt the need of more information, but he was cautious by nature and averse to pushing his inquiries in the presence of such a miscellaneous collection of persons.

The countryman who had been addressed as "Ben," was the one upon whom he fixed as his well of knowledge from which he was confident he could draw all the information he wanted.

It was an easy matter to inveigle him to one side, and, after presenting him with a good cigar and treating him to a temperance drink the hardy son of toil was ready to tell all that he knew.

Whitney spent some minutes in talking about the crops, throwing in a little politics, after learning the views of Ben on the leading questions of the day, and then he proceeded to business.

"You say that Oak Hall is about ten miles out?"

"We call it that, but atween you and me, it ain't much more than nine mile. If you want to go there it's too fur to walk, unless you've got plenty of time to spare."

"I don't know as I shall visit it, but I have heard of the place and have felt some curiosity to learn more about it. It is a fine residence, isn't it?"

"Yes; it's a splendid place. It stands back a good ways from the road and has so many oak trees around it that in the summer time you can't get a glimpse of it. Now, howsumever, when the leaves are fallin' you kin observe it purty plain from the road. There's a fine lane, too, leadin' to it and that has so many trees that though it's as straight as a hoe handle, you can't see along the full length of it in spring and summer time."

"Who lives there?"

"Now you've got me. I s'pose you know who built it?"

"I do not recollect that I ever heard."

"Old Captain Barlow, that made most of his money in wrackin' and I suspect much more of it in smugglin' if not something worse, built it just afore the War of 1812. The captain was an old man then, but I've often heard my father and mother speak about him. Right arter it was finished he brought a young wife to the place, but she didn't live long and there was strange stories 'bout the captain gettin' so jealous of a handsome sailor that called there that he killed both. Howsumever, I can't say anything sart'in 'bout them stories. The captain died soon arter and the house was shet up for a long time."

"It is not unoccupied now."

"Gracious alive! no; some twenty odd years ago, the captain's nephew moved in and he had a handsome wife too. But the folks didn't see much of them, for they kept to themselves. He must have spent a heap of money, for they say he furnished and fixed up the inside as handsome as one of your city hotels. The couple stayed there till a few years back when they moved away."

"And that brings me down to the present occupants," observed the detective, who began to suspect he had overdone the matter in treating Ben so liberally, since he seemed to feel that he must repay it by his quantity of talk.

"I don't believe there's any one in Asheville who can tell you who they are. Folks are seen goin' in there and comin' out again, but it is nearly always at night and they are so unsocial that we let 'em alone."

This certainly was interesting information and strengthened the conviction of the detective that he was on the track of the most valuable kind of knowledge.

The mystery surrounding Oak Hall was of the character that he had known to surround the resorts of criminals who took that means of guarding themselves from the intrusion of prying eyes. He did not doubt that this semblance of mystery had been maintained during the later history of Oak Hall for the purpose named.

"There's one queer thing about this business," added Ben, evidently anxious to give full measure for the kind treatment he had received; "and that is that there ain't nobody that has seen for ten years past such a thing as a woman go into and come out of Oak Hall."

"That certainly is remarkable, for it is hardly to be supposed that if any such thing took place, it would escape the eyes of the neighbors who take so much interest in the place."

Detective Whitney made a number of other inquiries, but he had already secured the main points of the information he was seeking.

"I may be mistaken," he concluded, "but I don't think I am far wrong in deciding that Oak Hall was the rendezvous of the gang of men who robbed the Asheville Bank and who abducted Gladys Linden. Anyway I shall know before another sun rises and sets."

CHAPTER XVI.

VOICES OF THE NIGHT.

THERE were times during the first twenty-four hours which Gladys Linden spent in her imprisonment at Oak Hall, when she believed her senses were leaving her.

There was something so uncanny in her meeting and conversation with Warren Carew, twin brother of her Uncle Tudor, that she was driven to this distrust of herself.

After his withdrawal from her room, she sat a long time in painful, distressing thought.

"I suppose that among the millions of people that make up the world's population," she said to herself, "there must be more than one instance of two persons being the perfect coun-

terparts of each other. I have seen wonderful resemblances myself, but nothing like this."

She was silent for a minute, while she recalled the first view she had of the man, when, standing beneath her window, he looked up so fixedly at her.

"Height, face, manner, voice, everything of which I could take note were the same. Nothing could have changed my belief until he came to my room and told me the truth. I am not sure," she added doubtfully, "but what Uncle Warren was a shade paler than Uncle Tudor, when I last saw him yesterday afternoon."

She strove to recall some slight difference in his trick of utterance or manner, but there was none.

"He said some awful shadow had crossed the threshold of their home years ago and that he now lived alone in this building—that is I do not suppose he means entirely alone, but apart from his brother whom he has not seen in a long time. It is strange that they do not meet. It seems to me that misfortune ought to bring the members of a family into the closest communion possible."

Gradually the mind of the maiden drifted back to the terrible words which her uncle had uttered toward the close of the interview.

"He said he would call to-morrow and tell me all that I ought to know, and he spoke of my power to save Uncle Tudor from shameful humiliation, disgrace and death. And he said, too, that I would have to give up Fred."

The maiden pressed her hand to her side as though she felt the thrust of a poniard's point in her heart.

"Give him up!" she gasped; "and he referred to that as though it was a lighter punishment than death; he ought to know more of the heart that truly loves. Death would be *nothing* compared to the anguish of yielding up my own, my true, my devoted, noble Fred."

Surely no man could have been held in higher reverence and affection than was the young bookkeeper of the Asheville Bank by this loyal and enchanting woman. Blessed man to be the object of such a wealth of passion and devotion.

"What can be the calamity which threatens Uncle Tudor, and how can I help it by sacrificing Fred? Alas! it is a fitting part of the mystery which marks my coming here. I wonder whether it can be—but no—no—no—how dare I think such a thought?"

She shuddered at the consciousness that actually for a single second she had harbored the question whether her Uncle Tudor had known or consented to her abduction.

But the next instant her heart rebuked her as though she had committed an unpardonable sin.

"How could I ask myself such a question? But I asked it before I realized its wickedness. Can it be that Uncle Tudor has lost his wealth in speculation or by some other means? If so, he shall have every dollar I own in the world. Fred has often said, and I know he speaks the truth, that he would love to take me as a penniless bride, that he might have the happiness of working and toiling for me. How I would love to be queen in our cottage home!"

For the moment she forgot her dreadful surroundings and the miserable fate which seemed to hang over her, in the recollection called up by the words last uttered.

It brought back the sweet picture which the lovers had often dwelt upon in the blissful communions when the future was all radiance and light.

The little cottage in which love reigned supreme, the happy, singing wife, the husband hastening homeward at the close of his daily work, the rapturous greeting, the evenings when they would be all the world to each other, the time when the dear little ones would gather about their knees—all these and the other delightful tintings of the vision were vivid and soul-entrancing enough to cause her to forget that she had been abducted and was a prisoner in a gloomy building, of which she knew nothing, and in the power of men whose intention she hardly dared speculate upon.

But not for long could this forgetfulness continue.

As she raised her head from the hand on which it had been resting, the latter touched one of the iron bars across the window where she was sitting. The touch was like ice, and caused her to start with a shiver, as though a gliding serpent had rubbed against her hand.

"To-morrow he is to come back and tell me everything," she repeated, springing to her feet and walking back and forth; "and what can he tell me that can justify this outrage? Who can expiate this crime? Does he expect that my friends will pardon such an offense? No wonder he has not been near Uncle Tudor for years, for he would strike him to the earth if he knew he thought even of laying hands on me!"

This loving, loyal exclamation lost its edge somewhat when the exasperating suggestion would interpose herself that if Warren Carew told the truth respecting the dire extremity in which his brother was placed, a cold, reasoning man of the world would say that it looked as if the banker was not entirely ignorant of the abduction of his niece.

"Well," added the latter, after a few more minutes of intense thought, "I shall fortify myself with the help of Heaven to meet whatever is coming, but it will take a wonderfully strong argument to convince me that the happiness of Uncle Tudor requires me to give up Fred—my own, my darling Fred!"

Twice in pacing back and forth over the rich, yielding carpet, she fancied she caught the murmur of voices, or rather the sound of a voice, which uttered a few words in a tone louder than usual.

She paused, but was unable to identify the point whence it came.

"There must be some one outside," she concluded. "Can it be that he is trying to attract my attention?"

She moved quickly to the window and looked out.

There towered the oaks, grim and ghostly in the bright moonlight, while the gentle night-wind swept through their branches with a sigh like that of some one in distress. Since the rain of the night before, many of the leaves had fallen, so that considerable of the fields beyond was visible.

But the keen vision, roving over all the space exposed to view, discovered no form of animal life.

She turned her head sideways, and, closing her eyes, so as to concentrate her senses, listened.

"If I *did* hear voices," she concluded, "they were those who, to whom they belonged, are not near my window now—"

The warning of a rattlesnake at her feet would not have startled Gladys Linden more than she was startled at that moment by the sound of a man's laughter!

It filled the room, as if the man who emitted the outburst was at her elbow. It was a clear, unmistakable ringing laugh, such as would be given by a man when thrown into an ecstasy of mirth by some grotesque humorous story, and it fairly echoed back and forth between the walls of the room in which stood the transfixed Gladys Linden.

More than that the laughter was precisely the same as that which she had heard many a time before.

She was sure it came from her Uncle Tudor!

No wonder she was paralyzed, for it would have startled a man with the strongest nerves, to have his meditations thus broken in upon by the roystering mirth that seemed to come from another world.

Recovering in some measure herself-poise, but with her heart throbbing painfully fast, Gladys moved across the room. As she did so the voices again fell upon her ears—this time with such distinctness that she located the point whence they came.

It was through the passageway of the dumb-waiter at the side of the room.

Stepping thither she listened.

Now she heard distinctly.

Several persons were seated in an apartment below, apparently drinking and enjoying themselves. The faint odor of tobacco smoke was perceptible to the delicate sense of smell of Gladys.

Evidently a party were holding pleasant conversation, and when some caused led to a raising of the voices the sound reached her ears.

To her surprise she found she was able to overhear what was said.

And the first voice identified was that which had given her such a shock and which she was certain belonged to her Uncle Tudor, or to his twin brother.

"The resemblance is as striking as everything that I saw and heard when he was in this room," thought Gladys, who leaned far over so as not to allow a syllable to escape her.

Somehow or other, the voices brought courage to the young lady. It will be understood that the cause of this was the palpable evidence that her senses remained with her, and that real flesh and blood human beings were at hand.

Even though they were unfriendly, their presence within earshot drove away the shadowy, chilling world in which she had been roving and having her existence for hours.

"It was the best haul we have made in a long time and I can afford to set up the champagne," said a voice, which she was sure belonged to Aaron Buckholtz, her escort of the night before in the carriage.

The clink of glasses sounded through the passageway, and it was a safe conclusion that a goodly quantity of wine was being spoiled in the popular fashion.

"Yes; if we keep on at this rate, we ought to be able to retire before many years."

This philosophical remark was made by the one whose laugh had produced such an effect on Gladys Linden.

At this juncture there was a shuffling of feet, and to the keen disappointment of the listener, the speakers shifted their positions, so that she could not catch the words spoken.

It did not take place, however, until she detected the strange, gruff tones of a third party, so that she was convinced there were three persons in the group below.

She grieved to recall that she had not discov-

ered the presence some time before, when she first caught the murmur.

She continued listening a long time, but nothing more reached her ears.

Then, prompted by one of those strange impulses which sometimes governed her, she walked to the door and tried the knob.

To her amazement, when she turned it and drew back, the door swung inward and stood open before her!

"My time has come for escape!" was the thrilling thought which instantly stirred her soul.

CHAPTER XVII.

CUTT WHITNEY TAKES A RIDE.

CUTT WHITNEY the detective gained all the information about Oak Hall which he thought worth obtaining, or which it was possible to obtain from his loquacious rural friend.

He shrewdly saw through the air of mystery which the occupants of the place had managed to throw around it, the effort to secure safety against the prying curiosity of their neighbors. The first desideratum of a party engaged in illegal business is to don this armor against molestation.

No surer means can be adopted among a simple-minded population than to infold the rendezvous in an air of mystery, and that, the officer was quite confident, was what had been done in the case of Oak Hall.

"If some of these good people should make a social call there, they would be likely to discover something which their hosts wanted to keep a secret, and then there's no telling what the result would be. Whether Miss Linden has been taken there, or whether the bank burglars simply met in the building to complete their plans cannot be settled just yet; but nothing is clearer to me than that Oak Hall is the place which is entitled to immediate attention from me."

There could be no question of the wisdom of this decision, but an important point remained which may not occur to the reader.

Convinced beyond a doubt that he was dealing with a shrewd gang that, especially at this time, were on the watch for the officers of the law, Cutt Whitney felt the importance of making no mistake.

He could procure a horse and ride out to Oak Hall, or he could go on foot, but, whichever method he chose was sure to expose him to the scrutiny of some sentinel of the law-breakers.

The matter to be settled, therefore, was how he was to reach Oak Hall without undergoing too close an inspection.

To ride out on horseback or to go on foot would be sure to draw attention to him, no matter what guise he assumed.

That this was the fact has been proven by what we have told respecting Zigzag's stroll in that direction on this same night.

Had Whitney been acquainted with the country, so that he knew the "lay of the land," there would have been little difficulty in this respect, for he could have taken a circuitous course that would have brought him to Oak Hall without discovery.

The detective stood on the corner of the street, just beyond the hotel, debating whether it was best to venture out on the Beavertown road on foot or on horseback, or whether it was not more prudent to await the morrow.

His judgment whispered that the latter course was the most advisable, but he was unwilling to pause in his work. His heart was so enlisted in the task that he could not remain idle during the coming night.

Besides, the absence of Zigzag led Whitney to suspect that he was on some trail by himself, and unless he stirred around pretty lively, the great detective was likely to "get there" ahead of him.

The trails followed by the two were converging and must soon meet.

While he was considering the question, a wagon rattled out from the yard of the hotel, and two lazy horses, driven by a farmer in a broad-brimmed hat, jogged toward him.

As they drew near, Whitney recognized his loquacious friend Ben, who had given him the valuable information about Oak Hall. The sight of the countryman determined the course of the officer on the instant.

Walking out in the road, so as to intercept the farmer, he raised his hand as a request for him to stop.

The look of surprise on the face of Ben changed to one of pleasure as he identified his friend.

"Whoa! I'm right down glad to see you; do you want to take a ride with me?"

"I don't mind if I do," said Whitney, climbing into the open wagon and taking his seat beside the farmer who seemed as pleased as a child to have his company.

"I feel like walking to-night," explained Whitney, making himself as comfortable as he could, "and I was on the point of taking a spurt of five miles out in the country and back again, just enough to make me a little tired, so I can sleep to-night."

"That would make ten miles altogether."

wouldn't it?" asked Ben, as if the problem was almost too difficult to solve without the help of a slate.

"Yes," replied Whitney, shading the snapping match just drawn against the side of the carriage, with his hollowed hands, until he could light the cigar between his lips.

"Why not ride out ten miles and walk back again?"

"It would amount to the same thing; are you going to drive that far?"

"Yes; I live in the next house beyond Oak Hall and I'll take you right by there."

"I've no special curiosity, but since you are going that way, I will be glad to act on your advice. You see if I started to walk five miles out, I might change my mind and turn about before I made that point, but if I ride ten miles why I've got to walk ten to get back to my hotel."

"Why not stay at our house all night and ride back with me in the morning?"

"I'm obliged to you, but don't you see if I should accept your invitation I would cheat myself out of the walk which I need? No; your first suggestion is a wise one and I'll follow it; I'll ride out to your house and then walk back. It won't be much beyond midnight when I reach home and I'll have several hours good sleep."

One fact gave Cutt Whitney a slight misgiving.

Ben Jones, as he announced his full name to be, lived close to Oak Hall, being less than a quarter of a mile beyond, as he explained further in the course of the conversation.

That being the case, was he not likely to be under the surveillance, in a greater or less degree, of the law-breakers who made Oak Hall their headquarters?

That is to say, that while he never visited the mysterious place, were not some of the members of the gang likely to manage it so as to meet him occasionally, and pick up what information he might be induced unconsciously to give?

"Ben," said the officer, in that sympathetic manner which he knew so well how to assume, "you have treated me so kindly that I make bold to ask another favor of you."

"What is it? I'll be gol-darned if I ain't ready to do anything I kin for you. That's the best cigar I ever smoked, and this one which you've jes' handed me I make no doubt is as good, if not gooder."

"It is from the same box. What I want you to promise me is that if any people from Oak Hall should ask you anything about me, you will not tell them the least thing."

Ben Jones stared over his shoulder as though he failed to grasp the height and depth and breadth of this request.

"There has been a little family quarrel which I'm trying to patch up," was the unblushing fiction of Whitney; "I don't want my presence in Asheville to be known to any one connected with this place."

"Why, how could they larn anything about it?" asked the astonished Jones.

"I meant when some of the folks there should meet you and ask questions."

"But they don't meet me an ax questions," said Ben, whipping his horses again into a trot.

"Very well; if they don't try to pump you, it is all right; and of course if they should try to do it, it will be all right."

"You can just bet your life on that," was the response of Ben, who in his enthusiastic devotion to his new friend, chirped and clucked and twitched the reins so vigorously that the horses gradually struck the best gait they had shown since leaving Asheville.

It need not be said that Cutt Whitney kept his eyes and ears open. He recognized the residence of Tullor Carew, the president of the bank, as they went by it, soon after reaching the open country which had been entered by Zigzag and followed by Fred Melville some time before.

Beyond the town limits, of course everything was strange to him, but in the bright moonlight nothing escaped his observation.

Having gathered all the knowledge possible relating to Oak Hall that Ben Jones could give, Cutt Whitney avoided any further reference to the matter. He feared that the curiosity of his friend might become too pressing for him to parry.

So he turned the conversation in the direction of Mr. Jones's own affairs, and, before the journey was finished, he was well up in the genealogy of the Jones family from the time of the Revolution down.

He knew that he had an industrious wife, of whom he was proud, and two bright boys who were big enough to give him valuable help in clearing off the mortgage on the little place where he was born and had spent all his life.

The information which Mr. Whitney volunteered about himself during the same moonlight ride was enough to take away the breath for any man who had the least reverence for the truth.

"There's the place," said Ben, before his companion supposed that they were anywhere near the end of their journey.

Whip in hand, he pointed to the right, where

Whitney saw a mass of trees, connected with the highway by two rows, amid which passed the lane to which reference has already been made.

Little in the way of outlines of the house could be seen, but the partly hidden twinkle of a light among the group of trees, showed that there was life in the gloomy and mysterious old building.

The detective was pleased from more than one cause. Although they had met several parties on the way out, there was not one who showed the least suspicion respecting him, and he was satisfied that all the strangers to him belonged to that section, for they nodded familiarly to Ben in return to his own salutation.

"Do you want to get out?" asked Ben, stopping his team opposite the opening of the lane.

"Gracious! no, not here; I'll ride a little further, and then strike out at a lively pace for home."

He therefore kept his seat in the wagon, much to the delight of Ben, who urged him to stay all night at his house; but bidding him good-by, with the hope that they would soon meet again, Whitney dropped lightly from the wagon, and turned his face toward Asheville.

But it was not his intention to push on to that town. He had reached the vicinity of Oak Hall without attracting any unpleasant attention, and, pleased over his own success, he was not the man to let it pass unimproved.

There was the best of opportunities to keep out of sight, now that he had reached the vicinity, while making his observations, and he grimly pressed his lips and resolved that "something should be done," and that right speedily.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

Now that detective Whitney was alone, he advanced along the road in the direction of Oak Hall with the utmost circumspection.

Looking to the right and left, in front and rear, he saw no person and was confident he himself was unobserved.

Holding his watch in front of his face, he illuminated the figures by drawing vigorously upon his cigar.

It was not quite half-past ten o'clock, so Ben Jones had made pretty fair time after all with his team.

Stopping at the side of the road, when he had not yet reached the lane leading to Oak Hall, he looked back at the house of the young farmer, which, standing close to the highway and being unshaded by trees, was dimly seen in the distance.

"There lives an honest fellow," thought the officer; "and if he was a little more intelligent, it might be wise to enlist him in my service. If I could only meet Zig here, so as to join forces, I would feel more confidence than I now do."

He was still gazing at the house behind him, when he was startled by a star-like point of light which suddenly appeared at one of the upper windows.

It shone so clear and bright that it was evident it was outside instead of within the window.

"That's queer," was the natural thought of the spectator, who kept his gaze fixed upon it.

The gleaming point remained stationary for a full minute, and then began slowly swaying to the right and left, like a pendulum whose oscillations possessed unusual amplitude.

"It is a lantern, and Mr. Benjamin Jones is swinging it," was the conclusion of Cutt Whitney. "He is not such a fool as I suspected."

Three times it oscillated through a large arc, and then went up and down the same number of times.

Cutt Whitney, standing with one side turned toward the farmer's house and the other toward Oak Hall, now looked to the latter for the answering signal.

On the side of Oak Hall nearest him, all remained shrouded in gloom.

Still the lantern-light of Ben Jones shone with the motionless glow of a star in the sky.

But only for a brief time, when the same signals were repeated. Three times to the right and left, then three times up and down moved the lantern.

And now the expectant gaze of Whitney caught the answer.

A bright point of light flashed from among the trees at the side of Oak Hall, and, remaining stationary a moment or two, went through the same motions that the lantern of Ben Jones had, but a short while before.

The next instant, the farmer's lantern vanished.

It had probably been drawn into the window and extinguished.

Almost simultaneously the light at Oak Hall disappeared.

The parties, separated by a distance of one-fourth of a mile, understood each other.

The light from Oak Hall was not so high as the other. It looked as if the man who replied to Ben Jones was standing on the porch, where Gladys Linden had stepped from the carriage in the storm of the night before.

Mr. Cutt Whitney was doing some brisk meditation.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" was the first exclamation that escaped him. "Some persons are not such big fools as they look to be, and Mr. Benjamin Jones belongs to that class."

"Well, well," thought the detective, grimly smiling at the clever manner in which he had been outwitted, "a man is never too old to learn. I wonder whether Zig has made any such tumble as I; I guess not."

Had Whitney known at that moment that his friend and co-laborer was nursing a battered head as he advanced along the highway and that it was caused by the butt of a pistol in the hands of one of the gang, he would have taken comfort from the thought that when brains are pitted against brains, there is no certainty which will win.

There could be no doubt that Ben Jones, the verdant farmer whom the detective had stumbled upon apparently by pure accident was an ally of the criminals that made their rendezvous at Oak Hall.

It was not improbable that he was in Asheville for the very purpose of spotting any strangers who might appear with an investigating turn of mind.

"By the great Caesar!" added Cutt Whitney, as he slowly pushed on toward Oak Hall, "I have met that Ben Jones on the street several times, and he was in the bar-room of the hotel, when I went up to the room of Uncle Peleg; can it be that he has any suspicion of him?"

The most alert detective would have been excusable for being misled by Jones as was Cutt Whitney. The latter was satisfied that he was the farmer he pretended to be, but he had veiled his acuteness so skillfully that no one would have suspected the shrewd ability that lurked behind those big, honest eyes.

"But he made a miss on one point," thought the detective with a little chuckle of satisfaction; "that swaying, see-sawing lantern which was intended to warn the parties up the lane has served the same purpose for me. He ought to have waited a little longer, though I don't know as that would have helped him."

Having advanced thus far, Cutt Whitney might well ask himself whether, after all, he had made any substantial progress and what was the next step to be taken.

Some of the difficulties of his situation will be understood.

Satisfied as he was that crooked work was going on within the mysterious building, he lacked the certainty that such was the fact, nor was enough ascertained to warrant an entrance on his part.

He had no means of knowing, nor indeed had he yet found any ground for suspecting that Miss Gladys Linden had ever set foot within Oak Hall.

While the translation of the cipher pointed strongly to the rendezvous of the burglars being at the place, and while the detective was almost morally certain that some of the gang were there at that moment, yet it would not do to make a blunder.

Suppose he was mistaken in his theory, in what way could he justify his forcible entrance of the building?

No; it would not do to strike just yet. He must wait until he could gather up a few more threads and weave them into a skein too strong to be broken.

Such and similar were his thoughts, as he advanced, with the stealth of an Apache Indian, toward the opening of the lane.

The rattle of a wagon approaching from the direction of Asheville caused him to hasten his steps, so as to gain shelter.

At the mouth of the lane were so many trees, that he had no trouble in concealing himself behind the trunk of one of the largest.

The wagon, as it drew near, was seen to be similar to that driven by Ben Jones, except that it was drawn by a single horse which showed better speed.

On the front seat were three men. The driver was on the right—that is closest to the watcher, the other two being partly hidden from view by his body.

Something in the appearance of this couple aroused the interest of Whitney, but, he could not gain the view which was necessary to verify his suspicions.

They did not look to the right nor left, nor did they appear to be aware of the proximity of the interesting structure known as Oak Hall.

"I seem to be in a latitude where the law is to believe every one guilty until he is proved innocent," was the wary conclusion of the detective; "those men may be as innocent as I thought Ben Jones was, but I doubt it—and now I am sure of it!"

The cause of this decisive exclamation was the abrupt stoppage of the wagon when less than two hundred yards from where he was standing.

It halted only a moment, but the sudden cessation of the rattling of the wheels was noticeable, though resumed so speedily.

Looking intently in the direction, Cutt Whitney dimly discerned two shadowy figures as they leaped out from opposite sides of the

wagon, and coming together at the rear, walked toward the lane where he was watching them with close attention.

They advanced with such extreme care that there could be no doubt their attention was fixed upon Oak Hall.

"They may be two of the gang," was his thought, "and if so, it will hardly do for me to be seen— Well, if that doesn't beat everything!"

He had recognized the couple.

"We'll stop here under the shadow of these trees," said one of the new arrivals; "it isn't very late and it's best that we should reconnoiter before going closer to the house. If I ain't mistaken there's a villainous-looking scamp crouching behind that tree-trunk there, and if I ain't still more mistaken, he is a tramp known among his acquaintances as Cutt Whitney."

With a chuckling laugh the detective advanced and gave his hand to the speaker.

"I'm glad to meet you, Zig, so far from home; and your friend here is—"

"Fred Melville, at your service," said the latter, cordially taking the offered hand and introducing himself.

Cutt Whitney never felt the hollow mockery of words more vividly than when he grasped the frankly-offered hand and declared himself delighted to make the acquaintance of the handsome youth.

While the hypocritical words were coming from his lips, he thought how likely it was that within the next twenty-four hours he would have to click the handcuffs over those same wrists and proclaim to the world the guilt of Fred Melville.

Under the shadow of the trees the two detectives briefly exchanged their experiences since they had seen each other earlier in the day.

Each narrative was of absorbing interest to the other.

Uncle Peleg removed his hat, and taking the hand of his friend, placed it on a lump as big as a goose egg on his forehead, with the remark:

"That's what stopped the butt of the pistol."

"I wish I could feel sorry for you, Zig, but I'll be hanged if I can," said Cutt with a guarded laugh.

"I'm not aware that I asked for your sympathy," replied the other, who knew how to take a joke from a friend; "though if it hadn't been for Melville here, I'm afraid, as they say out west, that it would have been my last sickness."

"He was a friend in need and therefore a friend indeed; but Zig, there's serious business before us: what's to be done?"

CHAPTER XIX.

ACROSS THE THRESHOLD.

GLADYS softly drew back the outer door of her apartment in Oak Hall and placed her foot across the threshold, but the next instant drew back.

A misgiving arrested her at the very moment her heart was aflutter with the thrilling hope of escape and liberty.

"Why is this door left unfastened?" was the question which checked her at the moment she had resolved that she would press forward and never return to the hated room again.

When so much care had been taken to shut off every loop-hole by which she could free herself, it certainly was strange that the most inviting opening of all should be left at her command.

It looked as if some trap had been set for her delicate feet.

But what trap could there be? Who in that house would dare offer her any indignity?

Aaron Buckholtz had guided the carriage in which she was brought to Oak Hall; but, with the exception of the cigar which he persisted in smoking after entering the vehicle, his personal course toward her was marked by the most studious courtesy.

He had not used an objectionable word, nor had he shown by look or manner that he held any wrong thought toward the prisoner.

That he hoped by some means to gain a singular advantage over her, either for himself or others, was self-evident.

What that advantage was remained to be learned.

Then Warren Carew, twin brother of her beloved uncle, was also in the building at that moment, for she had heard his voice and his laugh, so wonderfully like that of the president of the bank.

Surely he would never consent that any wrong should be offered her. Even if disposed to permit it, his fears of the consequences would deter him.

But he had spoken of a baleful shadow that rested on the household in which he and his brother were born. He had intimated that Gladys held the power of saving her Uncle Tudor from disgrace, humiliation and death itself.

She could form no conception of its nature, but why had she not heard the story from his own lips.

Could it be, she asked herself, that his late frequent attacks of dizziness and illness had anything to do with that awful terror that was creeping upon and strangling him?

Were his mysterious absences from home connected with his vain struggling against the fate that was bearing him down?

Surely it must have been that Warren Carew spoke the truth, and the tender heart of Gladys was oppressed with anguish that her Uncle Tudor had not made it known to her long before that she might have had the opportunity to stretch forth her arm ere it was too late.

But Warren had intimated in unmistakable words that one of the conditions was that she should give up her beloved Frederic Melville.

Surely she could never do that! Death was a thousand times preferable.

These and similar thoughts surged through the brain of the poor girl, who, after stepping across the threshold, drew back and held the door almost closed, while she debated the momentous question whether she should advance or stay where she was, and await the end that could not be far away.

Common prudence suggested that she should stay where she was, since, if she was permitted to pass outside the building, she would be a number of miles from home in a strange country, and in the middle of the night.

But a woman's instinct or intuition is a safer guide than her reason, and compressing her thin lips, she resolved that, come what might, she would go forward.

Once more the Cinderella-like foot pressed the yielding carpet outside the door, and stepping beyond, she closed it behind her. She had gathered her warm wrap around her shoulders and waist, and, though her headgear was of the gauzy, fairy-like character fashionable at such parties as the one she had attended at Ravenswood, yet with the exception of her thinly-shod feet, she was warmly enough attired to venture into the nipping air outside doors.

Standing at the head of the stairs, she paused with a rapidly-beating heart and listened.

The lamp was burning in the lower hall, shedding a mellow radiance above and below. There stood the massive hat-rack, the richly-covered chair beside it, though on neither was any hat, cap or coat to show that a single person was in the house.

To the right and left of the hall, as one entered from the outside, was a door, doubtless opening each into a room, for the broad hall was in the middle of the building. These doors, as seen from her position at the head of the stairs, were closed.

Now and then, the muffled sound of voices reached the strained ears of the listening Gladys, though she could not recognize the words nor could she tell from what quarter they came.

"It must be that Uncle Warren forgot to fasten the door behind him, after bidding me good-by," was her thought, though she could not assure herself that she was right.

It must not be supposed that the fair prisoner, after coming into the upper hall, stood hesitating and doubtful about the step she ought to take.

At such times one's thoughts are swift and tumultuous, and there was no faltering on her part. Having gently closed the door, she moved the few steps necessary to the head of the stairs and then began descending to the lower floor.

The rich stair carpeting when pressed by her delicate foot gave back no more sound than if she was treading on elder down.

Having put her hand to the plow, as may be said, the fair girl did not look back.

She came down the steps rapidly and was almost at the bottom, when she barely suppressed a gasping shriek, for she distinctly heard a voice from some point near at hand, saying:

"I'll be down again in a minute!"

She could not turn back, nor had she time to open the outer door and pass outside. She did the wisest thing possible under the circumstances; she pushed back the door on her right and passed into one of the rooms already mentioned.

Fortunately the hinges in Oak Hall moved with a luxurious noiselessness that would have delighted the heart of any late arrival or burglar.

Stepping within, she pushed back the door so that it was closed except for a tiny distance which allowed her to peer out into the lighted hall and see what passed immediately before her eyes.

She was not a second too soon. Indeed, there was an instant when she was sure she was detected, but she was not.

The figure that came along the hall, passing within arm's length of her, was that of Warren Carew, so very like Tudor that it was hard for her to restrain herself from calling out and flinging herself into his arms.

His clothing was different from that which she had been accustomed to see him wear, and she was compelled to believe that it was not he but the other so startlingly like him.

As he turned and began ascending the stairs, his side was toward the watcher so that she observed his face plainly. The pale color that she had noticed when seated in the room above stairs, had given way to a flush, caused no doubt by the wine he had been drinking.

As he placed his hand on the banister, she detected an unsteadiness in his gait, and the peculiar

blinking of the eyes proved that the fumes of the liquor had affected his brain.

To Gladys Linden this was the strongest proof she had seen that the man before her was the counterpart of Tudor Carew, but not the real person.

The latter was such a prohibitionist in principle and practice, that he would allow no alcohol in his house, nor would he take it even for medicinal purposes. The sight of Tudor Carew under the influence of intoxicants was a picture that Gladys could not form in her own mind.

Half-way up-stairs the man halted and leaned over the banister. The heart of Gladys stood still, for she was certain she was discovered.

But he was looking for some one else.

"Say, Buck," he called, in a husky, uncertain tone.

Aaron Buckholtz walked forward from the rear of the hall, and halting exactly in front of the door behind which the lady was listening, looked up with a laugh.

"Well, old man, what is it?"

"Do you think I had—that is—better call on the young lady?"

"Why not? It was your own proposal."

"But am I in the proper—that is—'dishion'?" he asked, with a lurch that narrowly missed bringing him to the foot of the stairs.

"Certainly; what is the matter with you?"

"Don't nothin' see wr wr wrong, eh?"

"Not the least."

"Sall right then, 'f you don't see it: Buck, you're a fool—that's right—go back: I'll yell for yer if my life gits in any danger of my death—that is—(hic)—"

Buckholtz now stepped to the door leading into the room where Gladys Linden was standing, and opened it!

Except where the light from the lamp in the hall entered, this room was in utter darkness and the close, musty smell showed that it had not been opened for a long time.

Pushing the door a few inches inward, Buckholtz faced outward, his position doubtless chosen for the purpose of gaining a better view of the movements of the uncertain individual that had just made his way to the upper hall.

Thus the back of Buckholtz was turned toward Gladys, who stepped slightly to one side, where the gloom of the room hid her. Her greatest fear was that the man would detect her presence from the tumultuous throbbing of her heart.

But such a catastrophe rarely takes place, and she was safe so long as matters remained as they were.

But the explosion must come the moment Warren Carew opened the door of the apartment she had occupied so long.

But despite the assurance of Buckholtz who was rude enough to wish to have some sport, even though there was risk of insulting a lady, the old gentleman lost confidence in his sobriety before he could enter the room.

This loss of confidence was caused by his attempt to grasp the door knob, his failure to do so by fully two feet, while he bumped against the wall with such a lurch that he almost broke his nose.

He straightway resolved to defer his call to a more propitious season, and came unsteadily down the stairs in the face of the assurance of Buckholtz that he was "all right," and well fitted to take care of himself.

He was stubborn, and insisted on going back to the room where he, Buckholtz and a friend could resume their carousing.

The moment Gladys found herself alone again she glided from the room in which she had been hiding, and placed her hand on the knob of the outer door.

To her inexpressible relief, the night-latch moved back without friction, and the next moment the cool night air blew against her cheek.

CHAPTER XX.

BIRDS OF THE NIGHT.

IT was about eleven o'clock at night that three men stood under the shadow of the trees at the end of the lane leading to Oak Hall.

They were our old friends, Zigzag, Cutt Whitney and Fred Melville, who were holding an earnest conversation in low tones, the subject of which was a proposed descent (by the youngest of the three) upon the gloomy building.

Whitney had stated the self-evident fact that nothing could be done, so long as they remained where they were, to which Zigzag replied with the equally self-evident observation, that it was better to stay there than to make a blunder by which everything gained would be lost.

"We have had enough slips," said he; "we both thought it would be easy to make our way to Oak Hall without discovery but we have failed to do so, and we mustn't take another step without feeling our way."

"But," insisted Fred Melville, who by the ordering of fate had become a prominent factor in the investigation, "is there not good reason to believe that the men concerned in the robbing of the bank are there?"

"Yes," answered Cutt Whitney, "that is, most of them."

Zigzag understood the significance of this reply, which was lost upon the young man.

"Then, why not force our way inside—search the house from garret to cellar—clean them out—arrest them all—and possibly find Miss Linden, and restore her to her friends?"

"I can understand how tempting a programme it is to you," said Zigzag, who appreciated the ardor of the lover, "but it won't do."

"Why not?" was the impatient demand.

"Since there is no call to leave this spot in a hurry, I will explain, my young friend. In the first place, we have no legal warrant, but would be acting merely on suspicion, which may prove without grounds."

"I'll take the consequences."

"That is a very kind offer, but the law isn't framed so as to allow a pleasing youth like you to assume the responsibilities that belong to two older heads. However, the consequences of a mistake in that direction would not be so bad after all, if that alone were involved, but there are far more serious considerations."

"Let me hear them."

"That some of the bank burglars, if not all of them, are inside of Oak Hall this minute, I have little doubt; but do you suppose that the party are unprepared for a visit from us?"

"Are we not well armed?"

"No better than they. Such gangs are always ready for a desperate fight, and I don't consider that there is any more chance of our getting inside of that building than there is of capturing Gibraltar."

"My friend speaks the truth," added Whitney, who saw that Fred was silent and thoughtful. "The only way that we can hope to do anything is by strategy."

"How much has been accomplished by that method?" asked Fred, looking quizzically at the speaker.

"Precious little, I'll admit; but we are not through yet."

"But suppose you can prove that the men you want are in there—what then?"

"Why, of course, we will make a descent upon Oak Hall, for we can summon all the help we want. We have only to appeal to the officers of the law, and, if necessary, we will raze the building."

"Do you think," asked the young man, in a voice in which he could not conceal his tremulous anxiety, "that she is there?"

"I cannot answer that question; to me the chances seem about even, though I am somewhat inclined to doubt it."

"May I ask since we are here, whether your intention is to stay in one spot all night?"

The detective laughed; the query was a natural one.

"By no means," replied Zigzag; "Whitney and I were anxious to reach this interesting place and we have succeeded in doing so."

"Though through much trial and tribulation," suggested Whitney.

"Now we must make a reconnaissance of the plagued spot and that is the most difficult job of all."

"Why?" asked Melville.

"You can see for yourself. The moon is shining brightly and the men in there are on their guard. The two gentlemen with whom I had the dispute have managed to find their way here, despite the fact that we got a lift with a passing farmer, while Cutt's friend under the innocent name of Ben Jones, has telegraphed the news to the persons inside there who showed that they caught on, when they flashed the signal back again."

"Very well," added Zigzag, "whether they are the particular parties whom we are seeking or not, they are no fools, and, being on their guard, they will watch every avenue of approach. If the night was very dark, we could separate, with a chance of doing something by creeping up close beneath the windows and listening. But the bright moonlight would play the mischief with any such plan."

"The only way of concealing ourselves is by keeping within the shadow of these trees, but, since that won't help us any, we will now venture a little closer and then I'll see what can be done."

Inasmuch as the lane was deeply shaded throughout the whole two hundred yards of its length, it was not difficult to steal forward for half that distance without detection.

When, however, they were so near that the outlines of the structure were visible, they dared go no further.

It was at this moment that Melville and Whitney saw Zigzag, who was a short distance in advance, bent down and closely examining a small patch in the lane, where the moonlight fell upon it.

His manner was that of an American Indian, looking for the trail of some person or animal.

And that was precisely what the detective was doing.

A depression in the damp earth caught his eye, and he scrutinized it closely with his nose against the earth.

It was the print of a horseshoe, with the toe pointing toward Oak Hall.

Examining the ground, near the depression, he found several others with the toes pointing in the same direction.

But there were none turned the other way.

"Mr. Tudor Carew is still there," was the conclusion of Zigzag, who of course had learned from Whitney all about the extraordinary departure of that gentleman on horseback.

Whitney had not yet told him of the astonishing discovery he had made by comparing the figures in the cipher with those that he saw on one of the pages of the bookkeeper's ledger that day in the Asheville Bank.

No suitable opportunity had presented itself, but he intended to consult with his brother officer the first chance he could get.

It looked strange that the two officers should be on such intimate terms with a man whom it was likely they would have to arrest within the next twenty-four hours; but it is by such means that most of the achievements of the professional detective are effected.

"Now," said Zigzag, "I think you had better stay here while I venture a little nearer. One man isn't as likely to be seen as three."

"That depends wholly on the men concerned; but go ahead, Zig, and good luck to you," said Whitney.

They saw their friend move as silently as a shadow through the gloom, so dense that he almost instantly vanished from their sight; then all they had to do was do nothing—the most tiresome of all occupations, so to speak.

From where Cutt Whitney and Fred Melville stood, they could see Oak Hall, but could hear nothing of what was going on within. As we have stated, the night was a crisp, cool one in autumn, with a bright moon shining from an almost unclouded sky. The clearness of the atmosphere was welcome enough while making their difficult way thither from Asheville, but they would have been only too glad to dispense with it now.

All the shutters on the lower floor were closed—those at the upper room being open, but the curtains were drawn, with the exception of the barred windows of Gladys Linden's apartment. Since that, however, opened on another side of the building, it did not come into the field of observation of the two watchers.

From their standpoint they caught the dull glare of the lamplight behind the curtains of the upper front room, but for all the good that it did them, it might not have been there at all.

"Fred Melville," said Whitney, after the silence had lasted several minutes, "there's no saying how long Zigzag may be gone, and we are likely to have a dismal time waiting. Provided we are not disturbed, it will be safe to speak in low tones."

"I'll be mighty glad," Fred hastened to reply, in the same guarded voice, "for I am not used to this sort of thing."

"It strikes me that you are in such need of sleep that you must have it pretty soon."

"My nerves are under too severe tension to allow slumber, though of course it will have to come in time."

"Some of the questions which I ask you may seem curious, but I hope you will give me honest answers."

"I always try to do that to every question asked me," was the manly response of young Melville.

"In the first place, how many people do you suppose were engaged in the burglary of the bank last night?"

"If the watchman is to be believed, there were three."

"How many were concerned in the abduction of Miss Linden?"

"I have no means of knowing, but I should say about the same number."

"Do you think they met at 'O. H.' before the crime was committed?"

The wondering look which Fred Melville turned on his questioner was almost visible in the darkness.

"If you'll put your queries in a shape that I can understand I will do what I can to answer them. What do you mean by 'O. H.'?"

"Oak Hall."

"Wouldn't it have been as easy to say so? I shouldn't be surprised if it proved that the plot was laid there."

"Another thing—Mr. Melville, are you fond of cipher writing?"

"Do you mean the formation of puzzles?"

"Yes."

"I can't say that I am particularly, though Miss Linden and I have sometimes amused ourselves in writing to each other by that means?"

"When did you last indulge in the amusement?"

"I cannot fix the time, but it must have been several weeks ago."

"Can you recall what your message was?"

"Really, Mr. Whitney—"

"I beg pardon," the detective hastened to say; "we'll drop the matter, if you please."

CHAPTER XXI.

WHITHER?

WHEN the crisp autumn air kissed the fair cheeks of Gladys Linden, as she opened the door of Oak Hall, it brought with it something of the revivifying power of a glass of water pressed to the lips of one whose blood is aflame with fever.

"I will never turn back," was the resolution

that found a whispered exclamation, as she softly drew the door to behind her; "now that I have started, I will die before I will yield."

The next instant, she had to decide whether she would turn to the right or left; that is she was obliged to choose between going down the lane to the highway and thence pushing her way homeward as best she could, or whether she would turn to the right toward the stable, and outbuildings attached to Oak Hall.

The fair fugitive would have preferred above all things to hasten down the lane to the public road and then, despite the lateness of the hour, to press toward Asheville.

She had a general knowledge of the course of the carriage and could hardly go wrong.

But she was restrained by the fear of pursuit. She was sure from what she had seen that her flight would soon be discovered. Her enemies were sure to follow, and how could she escape, since she was in a section where she did not know a single inhabitant?

Her pursuers would take the road to the right and left, and so long as she remained in the highway they would be certain to find her.

But, by turning to the right, toward the stable and outbuildings, she would come upon some place where she could hide herself until morning when she was hopeful of finding the means of reaching her friends.

So, after only a few seconds' deliberation, she decided to hasten to the right.

Alas and alas again!

Had she but moved down the lane toward the highway, she would have gone but a short distance before being clasped in the arms of her lover, Fred Melville, who would have given his life to protect a hair of her head from harm.

And had he only known, while standing in the dense shadow, holding such close conversation with Cutt Whitney, that she was on the porch of Oak Hall, debating which way to go, ah, how he would have bounded forward and defied all the powers of earth to take her from him!

But not yet! not yet!

Gladys Linden overestimated her fortitude; for, after hurrying beyond the dense shadow that enveloped the house, and reaching the massive stable, she shrunk from entering the interior, where all was blank darkness, and totally unfamiliar to her.

There was no telling what might befall her where she could form no idea of her surroundings.

Since, however, it seemed all that was left for her to do, she raised her hand to open the door with the intention of entering.

But, as she ought to have anticipated, the lock was as secure as if it belonged to the outer door of a bank building.

Gladys half laughed to herself, as she made her way to what may be called the barn proper, where the same difficulty was encountered.

The truth then dawned upon her that the only possible way by which she could spend the rest of the night under a roof, in that vicinity was by returning to Oak Hall itself.

But she would rather perish with cold and hunger than go there again.

So she gathered her wrap closer about her and pressed on.

The lane connecting with the public highway, did not terminate among the outbuildings of Oak Hall, but extended beyond and into a stretch of woods, whose dark outlines were seen by the young lady, as she moved in that direction.

There was something so forbidding and gloomy in their appearance, that she walked slower and slower as she neared them.

Gladys was on the point of stopping, when a slight rustling caused her to look around.

Certain that she saw the figure of a man approaching, she broke into a run and sped like a fawn to the forest for shelter.

Panting and almost breathless, she glanced once more behind her, before reaching the concealment, but that which had so terrified her was invisible.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, "but it was a narrow escape."

And yet it was probable that she saw nothing at all, but that her excited imagination gave form and outline to that which did not exist.

She had not yet entered the wood when she came down to a more deliberate walk.

To the right, and not far away, gleamed the surface of the body of water which she had seen more than once, through the bars of the window of her room.

"I can understand," she said to herself, "how one driven by despair would fly to such a refuge for forgetfulness from grief, but what could induce me to seek such relief?"

Indeed, she had no dream of so terrible a resource.

Youth and bounding health are not easily driven to suicide. Especially when sustained by the sublime faith of an overruling Providence and the consciousness of love returned, does the human heart cling to life with a vigor that will never yield.

The thoughts which surged through the brain of Gladys Linden, as she looked out at the mirror-like surface of the lake, were such as might have been expected in one who held so firm a

faith in heaven and in the loyalty and devotion of her lover.

She felt how puny and insignificant was her own strength, if it faltered when put to the test.

"No," she added, turning away, "I have no right to murmur because I find thorns in my path; I will press to the end."

But this time she was not mistaken.

Between her and the lake she discerned two figures. They looked huge and grotesque, as outlined against the silvery surface behind them, and they walked cautiously forward.

At that moment, Gladys was in the edge of the wood which she longed and yet hesitated to enter, and with the gloomy shadow unfolding her, she knew that she was invisible to the men who were so plainly seen by her.

Besides, they were not coming in her direction, but following a course, which, if continued, would take them to Oak Hall; such, doubtless, was their destination.

"Who can they be?" was the question which she naturally asked herself, while watching their movements with the closest interest.

They advanced at a leisurely rate, swerving to the left until finally lost to sight among the trees that surrounded the gloomy building.

"They must be friends of the people in the house," was the correct conclusion of the lady, "and, therefore, enemies of mine."

It may as well be stated that the parties whom she observed were the couple that had given Zigzag the detective such a lively reception earlier in the evening, when he was making his way over the Beavertown highway to the house in which the lady herself was a prisoner.

Gladys could not help contrasting her situation with that of twenty-four hours before, when she was the brightest and merriest of the gay party gathered at Ravenswood.

She recalled the thrilling clasp of Fred Melville's arm and hand, his burning words, his eager, hungry looks, his ardent devotion to her, and for the moment she forgot she was a fugitive, miles from home, and without a roof to shelter her head.

She felt and saw it all again. The intoxicating music, the delicious whirl of the waltz, the ravishing perfume, the joyous words and faces, the fairy-like land of enchantment!—all were there, and once more she lived over the blissful moments that were too radiant, too bright, too heavenly to last.

The night wind stirred the branches overhead and sougled among the limbs of the trees that were losing their clinging vegetation. With a sigh, she opened her eyes and gazed bewilderingly around her.

"Whither shall I go?" was the question that had trembled on her lips more than once that evening, and that stirred her heart again. "In the gloom of this forest I shall find shelter until—until when?"

One cause of terror was removed. Although from the indignity which she had suffered, it might be believed that she was living in a barbarous clime, or on the frontier of our own country, yet such was not the fact, and she had nothing to fear from the wild beasts which often render it unsafe for a man even to venture beyond sight of his own home without firearms.

But the prospect of spending five or six hours in the cold, dark, gloomy woods, was one from which the strongest-hearted person might well shrink.

The next emotion of Gladys was that of burning indignation because she was in this fearful situation.

"Why am I here? What have I done, what crime have I committed that here at the midnight hour, I am standing on the fringe of the dismal forest with no other shelter for my doomed head?"

"Who is the author of this indignity? Is it Aaron Buckholtz, that dares thus to heap insults upon me because I chose to reject his love and accept that of Fred? But this is a country of law and he shall receive his punishment without waiting for the retribution that God will surely visit upon him."

It seemed to her at that moment, as though she could visit him with the most cruel of deaths, for his daring defiance of law and the right.

That no punishment was too severe for the miscreant—*provided he was the responsible party*—will be admitted.

But alas! little did Gladys Linden suspect or dream of the whole dreadful truth.

It was only natural, perhaps, that the next feeling that swayed the heart of the gentle lady was akin to pity for the one whom she hated but the moment before.

"Poor man!" she sighed, "what a mistake that he should have refused to listen to conscience! what will he say when called to answer for this?"

"He can have no excuse, and putting off the day of repentance too long, he will find that it has been sinned away forever."

But it was idle to stand thus on the edge of the woods, hesitating and yet resolved to go on.

And so with a prayer to God for guidance and protection she went forward.

But whither?

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RECONNOISSANCE.

MEANWHILE Zigzag the detective was doing everything possible to gain the information that was so necessary to the success of himself and his associates.

Had he been allowed his choice, he would have preferred to be entirely alone rather than to have the company of Cutt Whitney and Fred Melville, high as was the esteem in which he held them both.

This was a scouting expedition, as it may be called, on which he was engaged, when numbers were likely to be an incumbrance, but the fates had decreed that they should be with him, and he accepted the decree with a philosophy that was a part of his nature.

It would seem that now that the eavesdroppers had entered the bank of shadow in which Oak Hall was shrouded, that one of their number at least ought to be able to move about without detection.

Such undoubtedly would have been the case, but for the mishaps by which the parties within were apprised of their coming.

"No doubt they are the proprietors of a dog, as big as a cow which will bounce out upon a fellow before he knows he is coming," thought Zigzag, as he halted within twenty feet of the building.

But that was another of the chances which persons in his business must take.

With an eye and ear trained like that of an American Indian, Zigzag looked and listened.

He could see the light from the hall within, shining through the glass over the door, but the other windows on the lower floor being closed, Oak Hall became like a "sealed book" to him.

Manifestly nothing was to be learned by standing still and he began a careful circuit of the building.

This was a delicate and difficult task, for it would settle the question whether any one was on the watch, after receiving warning that suspicious parties were in the neighborhood.

He was inclined to believe that, with the exception perhaps of a dog, no precaution of the kind he feared had been taken.

The ground for this belief was that there was no good reason why such a precaution should be taken, since neither he nor his allies could accomplish anything without entering the building.

The affirmative side of the question, so to speak, rested with the prowlers on the outside. They were obliged to establish their case, while the defendants had but to bide their time.

Step by step, and literally feeling every step of the way, Zigzag advanced on his perilous and dangerous business.

Had he been beyond the forest of trees which encircled the building, he could not have avoided detection by any one who might chance to look toward him.

But among the trees themselves, even though they were mostly denuded of their foliage, he was hopeful of escaping discovery by any sharp eyes that might be on the watch for intruders.

In this guarded and stealthy manner, he finally passed along the entire front of the building to a point where he could see the end of the structure.

Inasmuch as a new field opened on his vision, he stood still for several minutes to look and cogitate.

Several interesting facts became apparent.

The reader will bear in mind that he was now looking upon that portion of Oak Hall whence Gladys Linden had seen what she at first thought was the apparition of her uncle, Tudor Carew.

The curtains all being down in the upper part of the front of the house, Zigzag was unable to discover anything of an encouraging nature.

But his pulse gave a little extra flirt as he noticed that a light was not only shining from one of the upper windows, but that the curtain was drawn, or raised, so that whoever was inside the room could look out.

Consequently whoever was outside could look within, provided his elevation was sufficient.

The fact that the detective had reached this point without coming in collision with any dog satisfied him that there was nothing of that nature to make him afraid.

This conviction was highly satisfactory and nerved him to attempt many things that he would not have dared to do had the case been otherwise.

What more natural than that he should climb one of the trees affording such a view and take a peep at the interior?

It was a bold thing to do, for there was no saying who might be there to receive him, and there is no disputing the truth that a man "up a tree" is in anything but a favorable situation in case of danger.

The fact which annoyed Zigzag the most was that the trees directly in front of the window were so much sparser than at any other place.

But neither eye nor ear could discover anything amiss and having decided on his course of

action, he carried it out with his usual promptness.

A few minutes were enough to climb to an elevation that gave him an uninterrupted view of the room which was an object of so much curiosity to him.

He saw an interesting sight.

The light overhead was burning and he noted the bed, the rich furniture, the pictures and the handsome appointments, so far as they were visible to one in his situation.

He saw no one in the room, nor any evidence of its recent occupancy. Gladys Linden's natural neatness and the fact that she did not know at what hour she would receive a caller, led her to keep her apartment in the best possible order.

When she went out, she carried on her person everything that she wore when she entered Oak Hall the night before.

Consequently, there was no article of feminine apparel, no little trinket or toy to show that she had been there so recently.

But Zigzag was struck by one sight that greeted his sharp scrutiny; he saw the iron bars across the windows.

"Nothing is plainer than that they have been put there to keep some person in. It is hardly to be supposed that they were gotten up expressly for the benefit of Miss Linden, but I shouldn't be surprised if they had restrained her."

Strange perversity of fate!

At the very minute Detective Zigzag halted under the tree and looked up at the window, Gladys Linden was in the room.

At the very minute, too, that he began climbing with so much care, she passed out of the apartment.

Had he been a brief while earlier, or she a brief while later, the communication would have been established between them, an understanding quickly reached, and the singular history we have set out to tell, would have ended much sooner than it did.

For, had Detective Zigzag assured himself beyond all doubt that the missing lady was within Oak Hall, he would not have hesitated to summon the help of the authorities (had it been necessary) and "raided" the house in his most vigorous fashion.

Had the intoxicated Warren Carew stumbled into the room, an altogether different complication would have resulted.

But the eavesdropper observed nothing of the two persons whom he so narrowly missed seeing.

Remembering that he was in an unpleasant position, in the event of discovery, Zigzag lost no time in descending from his perch, drawing a sigh of relief when he once more felt his feet on solid ground.

So far as he could judge, no enemy had observed him since coming within the shadow of Oak Hall.

He knew how easily it was to be mistaken on that point, but he was plucky and nifty and felt quite able to take care of himself.

Resuming his advance, he now passed the other corner of the building, having gone fully half-way around the structure.

Suddenly his sharp ear caught the sound of voices. A ray or two of light shot out from between the tightly-closed shutters just in front, so that it was easy to locate the parties.

In the dense gloom no one could be seen, and the detective glided forward like a shadow, until he stood with his ear against the crevice so slight that the eye was of no service.

He now plainly heard the voices within.

More than that he recognized all three. The wine which they were drinking had mounted to their heads, else they would have taken more pains to control their tongues.

"I tell you," said one, bringing his glass down upon the table with a bang, "it's the biggest strike we've made since we went into business."

"And I tell you," said another in an equally uncertain voice, "that the strike hasn't been made yet."

"What's the reason—hasn't?" asked Warren Carew in a more shaky utterance than either; "isn't the boodle all right?"

"But the rest of the business isn't; we hain't out of the woods yet; the flies are there and are watchin' for us."

"That's so—Ben give us the signal a while ago—ole Zagzig himself has been down in Asheville playin' his dedge of Uncle Peleg."

"Yes, and there's another of 'em pokin' his nose round the lank and looking over the books. S'pose," added the speaker, with a grotesque attempt to be funny, "he thought he'd find one of the bu'glars atween the leaves."

"Why the mischief," asked the most sober of the party, "don't they 'rest Fred Melville? I spoke the name 'Fred' twice last night, so the watchman would blow onto it."

Detective Zigzag's blood tingled. He could no longer doubt the innocence of his companion, Fred Melville, despite several suspicious circumstances that remained to be cleared up.

"You see," added the same loquacious individual, "there was only three persons—that—that knowed the c'm'b'nation, and them was old Snoozer—or Foodor Canoe, the pres'd'nt, the c'shier and Med Frelow, the b'k-k'per."

"Mebbe they'll rest the *pres'dent*," suggested Warren Carew, "or Honeym'n."

"No danger *th't*," was the cheerful response, "but what I c'n't stand is why they don't scoop in the *b'k'p'er*."

"Course they must know we got it from him—course they do."

Detective Zigzag listened intently, in the hope of catching one or two important words that seemed on the point of the tongue of more than one of the gang, but they were fast reaching that condition that their words and sentences lost all meaning.

Ten minutes of this listening failing to give any more clew, he withdrew from the window, and noiselessly picked his way toward the end of the building opposite to that where he had climbed the tree.

It was here that the carriage had driven up from which Gladys Linden had stepped the evening before into her prison.

And it was from this door that she had stealthily emerged in her wild attempt to escape at the very time Detective Zigzag was descending the tree from whose branches he had peered into her apartment.

The officer was standing undecided for a minute or two whether to go further or to turn back, when he made the unwelcome discovery that he was not alone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

ZIGZAG the detective had substantially completed his circuit of the building known as Oak Hall, and was standing near the door opening on the lane, when he became aware that two strangers were in his immediate vicinity.

Accident gave the officer an advantage. He was standing still, and they were moving.

Had the case been reversed, more than likely he would have been discovered by them without betrayal of themselves, for the shadows inclosing them were so deep that only the keenest vision could serve its owner.

At first Zigzag could only hear them, but, peering keenly in the direction whence came the suspicious rustling, he made out the forms of two men feeling their way toward the same door that he had been inspecting for several minutes.

"Perhaps they are ambitious amateur detectives, was the thought of the disgusted officer, "and I would prefer a couple of imported bulldogs."

But he quickly discovered his mistake.

At the moment the new arrivals were ready to step upon the porch, and when their figures were shown distinctly by the light from the hall, one of them turned his head and looked down the lane with such a sudden start that Zigzag was alarmed lest his friends had betrayed themselves.

But it was only a simple matter of precaution on the part of the man, who saw and heard nothing unusual.

The act brought his profile into such clear relief that Zigzag observed his mustache and the general formation of his features.

Almost at the same moment his companion stepped into Zigzag's range of vision and a less distinct view was obtained of him.

It was enough. They were the two with whom Zigzag had had the skirmish earlier in the evening.

Instead of following the highway to Oak Hall, they had taken a roundabout course, so as to avoid meeting the detective and his companion Fred Melville.

This circuitous route had doubtless led them across fields and through woods that had so delayed them that their arrival was a long time after that of the couple whom they had sought to avoid.

Much to the delight of Zigzag, the scamps were disposed to indulge in a little badinage before entering Oak Hall. They were evidently so relieved at reaching the end of their laborious journey that they felt like a little pleasantries.

"Matt, how's your head?" asked one.

"I guess it's done swelling, was the reply of the other; "it's bu'sted my hat, so there's nothing to stop its growth; how's your crown?"

"I thought fer awhile it was caved in, I but believe it's all right. However, I'm six inches shorter," added the speaker briskly.

"Why?"

"When that infernal Zigzag gave me that fling over his head, I landed on my crown so suddenly that my head was jammed six inches back between my shoulders."

"I guess it will gradually work up, Jack, but if it don't, a lot of us will pull it into place again. I wonder if the folks expect us," added the speaker, stepping upon the porch, as though he had made up his mind to enter.

"It don't make any difference whether they do or not; if we ain't welcome we'll make ourselves so."

"If the detectives have got their eyes on this spot, we shall have to dig out."

"Where will we go?"

"There's lots of places, but I'm in favor of New York every time. It's the best hiding-place in the world."

"If it hadn't been for that infernal Zigzag, we would have been safe here," growled the other, "but he has a way of turning up just in time to spoil everything."

"What a pity we didn't finish him before that other scamp put in an appearance!"

"If he had been a minute later, it would have been the last of Mr. Zigzag."

"And it came very near being the last of us."

"I wonder what's become of the two," said one, peering around in the gloom as though he suspected that the dreadful officer might be lurking in the vicinity.

"No doubt they're somewhere in the neighborhood, but we'll give them a hot reception if they show up."

"Well, there's several bottles of champagne to be opened to-night and we must have our share."

The prospect seemed to arouse both, for they stepped forward, and, without any more words, entered the building.

It need not be said that Zigzag, the detective, was a deeply-interested listener to these few words. He had already learned enough to whet his appetite for more. Having recognized some of the parties concerned, he was able to form a pretty correct conclusion concerning the others.

The couple that had just passed from sight talked so familiarly that it was clear they had no fear of unfriendly ears overhearing what they said.

Talking thus, they addressed each other as "Matt" and "Jack." Even before they did so, Zigzag was convinced that they were two of the most desperate bank burglars in the country. They traveled under a dozen aliases, but their right names, there was reason to believe, was Matt Hardy and Jack Tovey.

There was one point which the watchful detective noticed, and which instantly suggested a daring act.

When Hardy opened the door for himself and Tovey, he applied a latch-key that worked so simply that there was but an instant's delay. The two then entered, closing the door carelessly behind them, so that there was considerable noise which seemed to attract no attention from any one within.

Observing this, Zigzag formed the audacious resolve to follow them into the building.

None knew better than he the desperate character of this attempt, in which it would appear that all the chances were against him; but there was something in the prospect which stirred his pulse, as the sound of the battle thrills the war-horse.

Besides, he has learned from his own experience, and it had been proven by the events of the night before, that the boldest plans are often more successful than the timid ones.

He was inclined to acquaint Cutt Whitney and Fred Melville with his purpose, but was restrained from doing so by his fear that Melville would insist upon going with him.

Besides, it would require considerable time which was too valuable to be wasted at this stage of the proceedings.

They had been told to await his return, and Whitney ought to know his business well enough to see that his orders were followed, since serious mishap was likely to follow any disregard on their part.

Zigzag waited perhaps ten minutes after Hardy and Tovey had passed from sight. He wished to give them time to join the revelers, as he was satisfied they would do with little delay.

To make sure on this point, he stole along the side of the building to the window, where he had played the eavesdropper some time before.

As he anticipated, he heard the voices of the two boisterously greeting and receiving the maudlin welcome of their friends. There could be no doubt that they had arrived.

Zigzag would have stayed to listen, but really there was little of anything to be gained by doing so. Accordingly he made his way back to the porch by whose door every one entered the building.

The little twist of wire which he carried with him, and in the use of which he was an expert, required slight manipulation in order to turn back the night latch, when the door readily opened and the next minute he was in side of Oak Hall.

His quick eye took in all the points that greeted Gladys Linden, twenty-four hours before, when she passed within, and he naturally stood irresolute, for a full minute before going further.

From his station, he caught the sound of voices from the room beyond, where he knew the revelers were rejoicing over the brilliant success of their double crime.

At the end of the minute Zigzag began ascending the stairs. He knew how to step lightly and was pleased to find that the soft, yielding carpet gave back no echo of his footsteps.

At the top of the stairs, he turned toward the room whose location he knew without the guiding light which found its way through the transom overhead.

The apartment had not been visited since the departure of the prisoner, and he entered with some care, not knowing whom he was liable to

encounter, but prepared for whomsoever it might be.

An indescribable something told the sagacious Zigzag that he was standing within a room made sacred by the present or recent occupancy of a lady and the brave fellow felt more hesitancy than he had known since venturing upon his dangerous enterprise.

Gladys Linden was one of those ladies who understood the use of the sweetest and most delicate of perfumes. The faint, subtle odor which reached the intruder was what might be called the suggestion of rather than a perfume itself.

It was so slight that it was hard to define its nature, but that it existed in the cool air of the apartment was as certain as that the man himself stood there, looking around, listening and wondering what next to do.

If there was any doubt in the mind of Zigzag, it was removed the next minute when he observed a satin bow on the floor. Stooping down, he picked up the pretty ornament which had fallen from the fairy-like slipper of the lady, unnoticed by her.

The detective was held motionless by the fear that she was present, if not in the room in the one connecting with it.

He was fearful that if such was the case, the sudden discovery of a man in her apartments would lead her to scream and thus ruin the scheme he had formed for her rescue.

Standing thus, he said in a low voice:

"Fair lady, I beg you not to be alarmed; I am a friend who has come to do what I can for you."

The words, repeated in a somewhat louder key, failing to bring any response, he ventured softly into the next room, which a brief examination convinced him was empty.

"She is not here, but whether she has fled or not is left to me to find out."

Naturally it did not seem likely to him that having been placed there as a prisoner she had been allowed to escape.

But the unfastened door through which he had just walked told that if she had wished to do so, the way was invitingly open.

Where then could she be?

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DEPARTURE.

It being clear that the lady for whom the detective was looking was in neither of the apartments just entered, he lost no time in useless search in that quarter.

Coming out into the upper hall again, he set about examining the other rooms.

But here he was confronted by a new difficulty. Every door that he tried was locked, and the wire which he knew how to use with such skill was unequal to the demands made upon it.

The locks must have been of an unusually complicated character, for the simple device had never failed him before. As it was, he was compelled to give it up.

Then he ascended to the third story. There none of the doors were locked and the matches which he struck gave him all the light he needed.

But no discovery of account was made, and he came back to the hall of the second story.

Before he could descend to the lower floor, the door from the room where the revelers were gathered, opened and the whole party came out into the hall. There they stood for a few minutes, talking after the rambling fashion of men whose wits were dulled by wine.

Zigzag longed to look over the banister and down upon the group, but, to do so, would have exposed him almost to certain detection. He therefore, kept back out of their range of vision and listened with all his ears.

The voice of each man was recognizable.

There were Hardy and Tovey, the latest arrivals, Buckholtz, Jud Dalrymple (whose name is now mentioned for the first time and who was the driver of the carriage that brought Gladys Linden to Oak Hall), Aaron Buckholtz and he who was known there as Warren Carew, twin brother of the President of the Asheville Bank.

What was singular was that this man who was most under the influence of the wine an hour before, was now by long odds the soberest of the party.

"He must have swallowed a strong decoction of coffee, or something of that nature," was the conclusion of the listening detective, who was quick to discover the interesting fact.

"You'd better stay all night," said Buckholtz, addressing Warren Carew, "for it is a long ride, and you're drunk."

"I admit that I was a little elevated awhile ago," replied the gentleman, with a slight unsteadiness in his voice, "but I have braced up a good deal since."

"Do you suppose your brother Tudor will be anxious to see you?" asked Buckholtz, steadying himself against the banister.

"Yes; I promised him to be there to-night without fail; we have some business of the utmost importance; I declare," added Carew, glancing at his watch, "I'm due this minute. Jud, will you be kind enough to bring out my horse?"

"Think you're making a great mistake—a great mistake," mumbled Jud Dalrymple, straightening up, "but, if you're set on going, why I s'pose you'll go."

With that, the man appealed to, opened the door and passed out.

"Boys," said Warren Carew, the next moment, "this must be the wind-up."

"The wind-up of what?" asked Matt Hardy.

"The champagne business. If I had gone into the room of my niece awhile ago, I would have made a fool of my elf. As it is now, my head swims so that I would not dare to meet her. It's all well enough to hold a little jollification over our success but you know we shall need our wits for some time to come."

"You're right, old man," remarked Jack Tovey; "our heads will be a little swelled in the morning, but we will be all right, and we must keep so until we're out of the woods."

"When shall we see you again?" asked Buckholtz, as their visitor began drawing on his gloves.

"Probably, not before a couple of days, though, if I can, I shall be here to-morrow night. You know what important business I have on hand, and that must be attended to."

"What about Miss Linden?"

"She will keep," was the coarse reply; "I promised to make a call on her to-morrow, but I will have to leave the business in your hands, Buck. You'll explain that I am too ill to do myself the honor, which I have no doubt will be better done by yourself. Besides," added the old gentleman, significantly, "it will give you a chance to make a point or two."

At this juncture, Jud Dalrymple opened the door and informed Carew that his horse was saddled and waiting. The visitor bade them all good-night and passed out, mounted his animal, and rode down the lane at a walk toward the highway.

Emerging from the dense gloom which enveloped this part of his path, into the moonlit road, he struck his horse into a smart gallop, which was continued until he reached the residence of Tudor Carew.

A bright light was still burning in the upper front room, showing that the old gentleman was expected.

The ride through the brisk autumn air clarified his brain, so that he was entirely himself when he arrived in the small hours of the morning.

Riding straight to the stable, he put away his horse, and shortly after let himself into the house, where, for a brief while, we must leave him to himself and friends.

Since the revelers had given their promise to bring their carousal to an end that evening, appreciating as they did, even in their maudlin condition, the necessity of doing so, they concluded they might as well make a night of it, and secure all the so-called enjoyment possible.

So they went back to their room, and once more, as may be said, Zigzag was left monarch of all he surveyed.

It was fortunate, no doubt, that the men were in this shameless state, for otherwise it is inconceivable how even so skillful and daring an officer could have made the tour through the building without discovery.

The party had received sufficient warning that the eyes of the officers of the law were upon them, and they ought in self-defense to have kept cool, clear and level heads.

It was Jud Dalrymple who saw the signal of Ben Jones, the farmer with his lantern, and who answered it. That signal to Oak Hall said that suspicious characters were near, and warned them to be on their guard.

Dalrymple was returning from a visit to the stables when he caught the signal, and he knew that his duty was to apprise his friends of the discovery; but he had more weakness for strong drink than any of them, and he was fearful that the result would be a postponement of the champagne that had been agreed upon. So he kept the important secret to himself.

As for Hardy and Tovey, they had agreed before their arrival at Oak Hall to say nothing about their meeting with Zigzag and his comrade while on their way thither.

They naturally shrunk from telling about an encounter in which they would be forced to admit they were worsted. They meant to give all possible aid to their friends in the fight with the law but they could not see that a failure to report the incident described could make any great difference either way.

As for Zigzag, it cannot be said that he was satisfied with what he had accomplished.

That he performed a brilliant exploit cannot be questioned but he failed to obtain some very important information that he was desirous of securing.

He no longer doubted that the men whom he had seen and to whose utterances he had listened were the ones that had robbed the Asheville Bank and had abducted Gladys Linden.

But where was the "boodle?"

He had not been able to gain the first clew to its whereabouts. Whether it was in Oak Hall or a hundred miles away was a question still awaiting solution by him.

Not a single utterance that he had heard indicated where it had gone.

The expressions below stairs told him that the gang believed that Gladys Linden was in her apartments.

It was possible that she was still concealed somewhere in the building, but he suspected the truth—that she had slipped out and was gone—but whither?

Ay, whither?

Should the detective stay any longer in Oak Hall, with a view of picking up information?

He had already been away for a long time from his friends and they might become so uneasy that they would take steps to trace his whereabouts.

Convinced as he was that the only occupants of the house were the men that have been named, he feared the result of any such attempt on the part of one so careful even as Cutt Whitney, when he was handicapped by the presence of such an impetuous lover as Fred Melville.

Jud Dalrymple, of whom mention has been made as the driver of the carriage which took Gladys Linden from her home, besides being a full member of the gang that was concerned in so many unlawful deeds, was the one specially fitted by his attainments to act the part of a servant.

It was he who looked after the horses and vehicles, who did the cooking, for it was true as stated by Ben Jones, that there were no female members of the Oak Hall household, Jud acting as the general man of all work.

He, like the rest, was an old acquaintance of Zigzag, who knew him as a cowardly sneak, capable of doing anything required of him by his masters.

Zigzag had enunciated the doctrine that no detective should enter upon any task with a theory of his own, since it was almost certain to warp the action of his mind. All the same, however, such theories of necessity would shape themselves as the investigation proceeded.

It was his belief, founded upon what he had seen and heard since being inside of Oak Hall, that the two hundred thousand dollars abstracted from the funds of the Asheville bank were not in the building.

He believed they were in the city of New York, and he held a strong suspicion of the hotel in which they were waiting for the favorable chance for an equitable division of them.

Fully aware also of the liability to err in this direction, he was determined, nevertheless, to seize the first chance to go to the metropolis and push a little exploration of his own along a line independent of all other investigators that might feel disposed to take a hand in the same delicate and difficult business.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DISCOVERY.

As Zigzag anticipated, after leaving the building, he found Cutt Whitney and Fred Melville impatient at his prolonged absence.

Indeed the younger man had urged the other more than once to venture closer to the building and to undertake some investigations for themselves.

They had seen the elderly gentleman come out and ride away, and, from the glimpse which they caught of him, they were convinced that it was Tudor Carew, who struck his horse into a swinging gallop upon reaching the highway.

Zigzag gave a hurried account of his interesting experience after separating from them.

In telling the story, he took care to make no reference to his visit to the apartments of Gladys Linden.

Had her lover known that she had been and possibly still was in Oak Hall, he could not have been restrained from forcing his way into the house and as may be said, bearding the lion, in his den.

Had he been told that she was there some time before, but was now gone, he would have started on a wild hunt that might have brought about a fatal complication of matters.

So the narrator reserved his full account for the ears of Cutt Whitney alone.

"We are through for the present," he added, "and now we will start on our long tramp homeward."

Fred was disappointed, but he saw there was no help for it, and they set out on their return.

It was not far from morning when they arrived in Asheville and it need not be said that the party were well used up.

This was especially the case with young Melville, who had been on the go for so long and was deprived of all sleep for two nights.

Vigorous and rugged as he naturally was, he had pushed nature to the utmost. And so, when he flung himself upon his downy bed, under his own roof, he sunk into a slumber which lasted until the following afternoon.

And this was precisely what Zigzag and Whitney wished, for it eliminated him from the problem at a most critical stage. Much as they liked him, they preferred to pursue their labors without his help, if such it may be termed.

After bidding him good-night on reaching the town, the two officers continued their way toward the hotel, holding some earnest conversation on the road.

Whitney abruptly asked the question:

"Do you believe Melville had anything to do with the robbery of the bank?"

"Impossible!"

"What about the cipher?"

"Don't you see that if he was the author of that, as seems to be the case, judging from what you tell me, you place him in the absurd position of conspiring to abduct Gladys Linden for whom he would be happy to sacrifice his life?"

"But the figures in the bank ledger—"

"No matter what," impatiently interrupted Zigzag; "the ridiculousness of what I tell you renders the question beneath discussion. I admit that I had my suspicions of him, but they were only general and formed off-hand."

"I am anxious to believe as you do; nevertheless, the same hand which made the figures in the cipher made those in the ledger of the Asheville Bank."

"What part of the book did you examine?"

"The first page."

"Only that?"

"That was all."

"Go back to-morrow and compare several more pages. Find out who formed the figures on the first page of the ledger and don't be so quick in jumping to conclusions."

The two men were tired from their long tramp, and perhaps from that cause, the great Zigzag was more impatient than usual.

For the reason, too, that Cutt Whitney knew this reproof was deserved, he was out of sorts.

A few words only passed between them, and, being admitted by the dozing watchman, they were glad to seek their beds and enjoy their much-needed rest.

Both men were accustomed to irregular hours and neither slept as long as would be supposed.

It was comparatively early when Whitney rose from his bed, and, dressing himself, went down to breakfast. Seeing nothing of his friend, he decided to let him slumber awhile longer.

After the morning meal, however, he went to his room and was not a little astonished to find it empty.

Zigzag had left for some unknown destination.

Hoping to find him below stairs, Cutt inquired in a casual way of the clerk concerning their entertaining friend, Uncle Peleg.

"He left on the early train," replied the clerk, with a smile.

"For what place?" asked Whitney, hiding his curiosity.

"Gone back to New Hampshire; he said he was so 'consarned sick' of Asheville that he wouldn't spend another day here."

"Is he coming back?"

"I don't believe we will see him again; a queer fellow that."

"Yes; he was so extremely verdant that I became quite interested in him."

"He had but a few minutes in which to catch the train, but he wouldn't leave until I threw twenty-five cents off his bill, after which he counted over his money, and expressed his fear that he wouldn't have enough left to pay his expenses home."

It was needless to inquire further, but Cutt Whitney did not feel particularly comfortable over the course of Zigzag.

True, he freely acknowledged that he was his superior, but he thought it shabby treatment that he should have taken his departure in that abrupt manner, without so much as saying good-by.

But that was his way, and it was idle to complain.

Besides, it was uncertain where Zigzag had gone. He had spoken of making a journey to New York and possibly had gone thither.

But it was by no means sure that he had left Asheville, though no person besides Cutt Whitney was liable to doubt it.

It was certain that he had sought to give the impression, but it would not have been strange had he, after buying a ticket to New York, got off at the first station and returned.

Had he done this he would not have come back as Uncle Peleg White of New Hampshire, but in an entirely different make-up. From the capacious carpet-bag he would have drawn the outfit of some other character, and in making the change it would seemingly be a complete transformation of his own natural self.

There could be no saying in what disguise the master detective would enter Asheville, for he had half a dozen different impersonations that were favorites. But it was safe to believe that whichever he assumed would be so perfect in its way that it would take all the penetration of Cutt Whitney himself to read it.

After making his inquiries, Whitney lit a cigar and seated himself in one of the chairs in the bar-room.

A number of loungers were present, even at that comparatively early hour, and the detective had taken only a few puffs of his cigar when his acquaintance of the night before, Farmer Ben Jones, walked in.

To have seen these two meet and shake hands, a stranger would have supposed they were long-separated brothers instead of arch hypocrites.

"My journey didn't amount to anything,"

said Cutt Whitney, in answer to the inquiries of the farmer; "there seemed to be a number of persons there, but I couldn't learn anything and I came back."

"Why didn't you knock at the door and make yourself known?"

Whitney shook his head with a laugh.

"None of that for me; I might have got a pistol-shot or a cracked pate."

"You had a long walk back."

"So I did, and all the way I thought of the nice comfortable bed in your house to which you invited me; but I was so worn out that I had a good sleep when I did reach the hotel; I haven't been up long; you see you told me so much about the house that I felt rather crawly when I found myself near it."

"That's the way it hits me," was the unblushing response of Ben, "when I get too near the plaguey spot; so I contrive to give it a pretty wide berth."

"Don't you ever visit it?"

"Never."

"Well, I can't say that I blame you."

"If you want to take a look at it by daytime, I'll give you a ride out ag'in; my team is out in the shed and I'll be drivin' back arter dinner."

"No; I thank you. I'm afraid it has all been lost time, and my coming out here is a blunder."

"Why so?" asked Ben with no effort to conceal his curiosity.

"Well, I had a little private business that I didn't mention to you, which brought me to Asheville, but I'm satisfied now that I was off the track altogether."

Cutt Whitney was hopeful that he was misleading the innocent-looking farmer.

Perhaps he was. Perhaps again he wasn't; the near future would decide.

A task in which Whitney felt a strong personal interest was before him.

Not doubting that the officers were at work in the bank, he made his way thither, avoiding attention so far as he could.

In reply to the inquiries of Mr. Hyneman, he said that he thought that there was an excellent prospect of running the burglars to earth, and of recovering a portion if not all of the funds.

Of course it would be premature to speak at that early stage of the proceedings, but he would not fail to keep Mr. Hyneman and Mr. Carew apprised of the progress of their investigations.

The cashier stated that the president was so much better that morning that he had started on one of his occasional trips to Boston. He was engaged on important private business and expected to be back within two or three days at the most.

"I shouldn't wonder," thought Whitney, "if Uncle Peleg stops over in Boston on his way to New Hampshire."

Finally he said he would be obliged for another glance at the bank ledger.

The cashier was always glad to accommodate him and placed the book on the desk before him.

Five minutes were enough; Zigzag was right. Fred Melville did not make the figures in the cipher writing.

But who did?

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT PARKER'S.

ON the second evening succeeding the robbery of the Asheville Bank, a lively party were gathered in the fashionable gambling-saloon, of Phosh Parker, in one of the most select portions of the great metropolis of our country.

We have no purpose to describe that gilded gateway to destruction, where so many entered upon the broad road from which there seemed no more hope of retreat than there is for the confirmed victim of the opium habit. Nor is there any desire on our part to depict any of the numerous games of chance continually played there, which have such a fatal fascination for so many of the brightest and best of the land.

But there were several individuals in Parker's on the Saturday night to which we refer whose actions concern the tread of the incidents we have set out to narrate.

One of the leading frequenters of Parker's for years was Asaph Ashman. Although past middle life, he had been known for a long time as one of the gayest *habitués*, who was not afraid to spend money, and who emphatically lived up to the doctrine of "following the leader," whenever a party of congenial spirits met with him.

He had been known to win ten thousand, and to lose twenty thousand dollars in a single night. Some of his barum-scarum adventures were the talk of the clubs, and more than once had landed him in the police-station. But they ended there, for Ash was one of the many "bloods" who had enough influence to keep his name out of the papers, and to escape always with nothing more than the imposition of a fine.

We have said enough to indicate pretty clearly the character of Asaph Ashman, who was seated in the rear apartment of Parker's saloon on the Saturday evening named, indulging in a quiet game of poker with a couple of friends. The soft Axminster carpets gave back no sound when the heavy foot pressed them; the colored waiters were arrayed in spotless suits, the walls were adorned with the most exquisite

paintings, and here and there were figures of statuary that would have been a fortune to many of the crazed victims of play who rushed from the dazzling den to seek oblivion in the icy waters of the Hudson.

We must introduce the three gentlemen who are sitting apart by themselves, deep in the enjoyment of the game, accompanied as it is by the finest wine and choicest Havanas from the favored district of tropical Cuba.

Ashman, as we have stated, was beyond middle life, but he was attired as faultlessly as though he was still a gay youth of twenty-five. His hair was carefully brushed, and among its dark, auburn locks could not be traced the first thread of silver. (That, however, was due to art instead of nature).

A casual glance would have pronounced him a well-preserved man of thirty or thereabouts, but a closer inspection told a different tale, for no art could conceal the crows' feet around the eyes, nor hide the ravages of time as shown in the general weakness of the frame, despite the fierce effort of the owner to appear and act like one of half his years.

The gentleman most familiar with Asaph Ashman was Aaron Buckholtz, of whom almost sufficient has already been said. He was one of the parties concerned in the bank burglary, and was last seen by us on the evening before, when he parted company with Mr. Warren Carew at the door of the gloomy old building known as Oak Hall.

The third party was a man approaching middle life, known as Conrad Appleton, and the representative of the well-known jewelry firm of Everingham & Company, Maiden Lane. There seemed to be good reason to believe he was well supplied with funds, and it was immaterial whether it came direct from the safe of his employers or constituted a portion of his legitimate salary; all was fish that came to the net of the fishers at Parker's.

As the hours advanced, Appleton showed the effects of the wine which he sipped more than did the others. Still he was a skillful and at times an unusually fortunate player. While he lost heavily, his winnings were more weighty, and when midnight came, he was unmistakably ahead to the extent of several thousand dollars.

To Ashman and Buckholtz it was simply blind luck that helped the stupid fellow to rake in so much of the stakes, and more than once, observing his half-maudlin condition, they expressed their impatience, occasionally indulging in remarks which, to say the least, were imprudent.

"If his luck keeps on," said Buckholtz, "it won't do for us to stay in the game."

"Why not?" asked Ashman, in a low voice.

"You know how it affects you, Ash; you're likely to lose your head."

"Not I; I've been there too often."

"But the divvy ought to be made first; I'll never consent to touch any of the funds of the others."

Appleton appeared altogether oblivious to these observations, which were made in a jerky, broken way, often with considerable space between the direct questions and answers.

The representative of the house of Everingham & Company experienced a serious turn of luck at this juncture. He seemed to lose his judgment and to the delight of the others who, he did not seem to suspect, were pitted against him, he lost a couple of thousands so quickly that their spirits were elevated to as great a degree as they had been depressed a few minutes before.

Still, with the infatuation of a man in his situation, the traveler continued playing in his blind, reckless fashion, losing large amounts, until it was quite evident that his winnings and his losses, at the best, were no more than even.

"I guess I've had enough," he suddenly exclaimed, at the conclusion of a game in which he had again lost.

"It's no time to stop now, my friend," said Ashman. "It is just becoming interesting."

"That's so," replied Appleton, unsteadily; "but I ain't jes' in the 'dition—you can see that yourselves."

"Bah! You're all right. What's the matter?"

"Yes—all right for you; but I'll wait till Monday night—then'll come 'round and have it out with yer—yesh'll have it out with yer—sure's a gun."

Ashman and Buckholtz exchanged significant glances, and the latter said:

"I have an engagement, and can't be here Monday night."

"So have I," Ashman added. "Try another hand, and then, if you want to quit, why, do so!"

But with the stubbornness which a half-intoxicated man often shows, Appleton shoved back his chair, with a muttered exclamation, and, sinking his head on his chest, relapsed into heavy slumber, as it seemed.

The couple surveyed him with disgust. Then, as they had no object in playing against each other, they too laid down their hands, took a sip of wine, and, lighting fresh cigars, exchanged

a few remarks intended for their own ears alone.

"None of the boys will be down to-night?" remarked Buckholtz, inquiringly.

"No, none of 'em at all."

"They may come in to-morrow."

"They can't do that; no trains run from Asheville on Sunday."

"I thought the divvy was to be made here to-night."

"That was the idea, but we'll have to make it at Oak Hall."

"Why?"

"Those infernal detectives; there's two, and Zigzag is one of 'em; I didn't dare bring the stuff with me, because I knew he was on the watch somewhere. I don't see why I should take all the risk anyway," added Ashman, half-angrily.

"Nobody asked you to," replied Buckholtz, as all-humoredly as the other; "it was your own proposition."

"I know; I didn't suppose they would have the flies in Asheville so soon. I saw them on the watch at Jersey City when I got out at the station, and I've no doubt they followed me."

"Are you sure you threw them off?"

"Depend on me for that," said the other, with some pride of manner. "I've doubled on them before, and when you find a detective that can run me down, I'll resign and climb a tree."

"I hope there hasn't been any blunder," observed Buckholtz, like one who wished rather than felt sure that such was the fact: "we made a good haul, but as was said at Oak Hall last night, we ain't out of the woods yet."

"When did you leave?"

"About noon."

"Did you see or hear anything?"

"Not a thing—Ah! but I forgot one thing. Miss Gladys Linden has left Oak Hall!"

Ash Ashman uttered a frightful execration, and nearly tumbled backward out of his chair, gasping:

"What's that?"

"It's the solemn truth."

"How did it happen?"

"When Warren Carew made his call upon her, he forgot to fasten the door behind him; of course she then walked out of the room, down stairs and left by the front door."

"That's a lie! Carew locked the door."

"Then Miss Linden must have had a key which fitted the lock."

"Are you sure she is gone?" asked Ashman, fairly green with anger and consternation.

"There's no earthly doubt about it; Gladys Linden is not in Oak Hall."

"Did you search the house?"

"From top to bottom."

"But the passageway—"

"She knows nothing about that, but we didn't forget to explore it."

The conspirators in their excitement forgot all about Mr. Conrad Appleton, who was sleeping so heavily in his chair. Had they noticed him carefully, they would have seen that one eye was wider open than usual, his breathing was more quiet and something like a grin was twitching around the corners of his well-formed mouth.

Having tormented Ashman enough, Buckholtz now followed with an announcement scarcely less startling than the one made a few minutes before.

"It is true that the young lady is not in Oak Hall, but she is just as much in our power as if she was locked in there; in fact *she's safe!*"

"Buck, don't trifle with me; this is too serious a matter."

"I'm concerned about as much as you, and I'm telling you the honest truth when I say that she is as safe and just as much in our power as she was when locked in her iron-barred room."

"I'll believe that when you explain, and not before."

CHAPTER XXVII.

DISINTANGLING THE SKEIN.

THEREUPON Aaron Buckholtz gave the explanation, in a few brief sentences while Ashman listened with bated breath.

Appleton, leaning forward in his chair, with his chin upon his breast, and apparently sleeping profoundly, did not allow a word to escape him.

He could hardly repress an exultant exclamation, for there was a deeper meaning to the words which fell upon his ears than any one else dreamed of.

"So you see," added Buckholtz with a chuckle "that it's just as well as if we had her back again in Oak Hall."

"I don't know about that," replied Ashman, who, nevertheless was vastly relieved by the story which had just been told; "Oak Hall is built for that kind of business."

"That may be, but the detectives have got their eyes on it, and if they should choose to make a raid, it would be a little awkward to find Miss Gladys spending her vacation in that room up-stairs, with the door locked and iron bars across the windows. They'll never think of looking for her where she is now."

"I hope not."

At that instant, the snoring Appleton made a

lurch forward, falling out of his chair upon his hands and knees.

One of the ever watchful attendants ran forward and kindly helped him to his feet.

"That's all right (hic!)" he muttered, getting his hat on wrong side before. Then facing unsteadily about, he blinked at the two men with whom he had been playing earlier in the evening and managed to grumble:

"Meet me here by moonlight alone—Monday evening, shay?"

"Make it Tuesday," said Ashman smartly, "Tuesday at nine o'clock sharp."

"S'all right—make her Choosday—thirteen-and-a-half clock—be here sure—good-night—E pluribus unum go brag!"

And, helped by the same servant that had been so attentive to him, the tipsy fellow reached the bracing night-air outside. The attendant wished to call a cab, but Mr. Appleton flared up, saying that if he meant to insinuate that he was laboring under the influence of liquor he would shoot him on the spot, though uncertain which would be the best spot.

Somehow or other the poor fellow managed to stagger along without falling down, though some of his lurches seemed certain to end with his pitching prostrate in the gutter.

"Say, old chap, you're slightly under the influence," called a large, burly stranger, stopping short in front of him; "it'll be a charitable thing for me to give you a lift. I'm a dandy at playing the good Samaritan."

He slipped his arm within that of the reeling Appleton, and then reached for the gold watch and chain, intending to follow up that with the capture of his pocketbook.

Before the handsome chronometer could be coaxed from its receptacle, the left hand of the traveler shot out straight from the shoulder with the force energy of a mule's hind-foot.

The iron fist landed squarely between the eyes of the scoundrel, who caught a glimpse of a firmament of stars as he went over on his back in the gutter, with his toes pointing toward the zenith.

"There!" exclaimed the indignant Appleton, "that'll be a lesson when you next undertake to go through a drunken man."

And the athletic representative of the house of Everingham & Company walked down the street with as brisk and upright a step as a West Point cadet.

"I wonder whether that scamp was more surprised than Mr. Asaph Ashman and Aaron Buckholtz would be if they had known that the tipsy victim they got hold of to-night was Uncle Peleg White, whom Hardy and Tovey had their tussle with, on the Beavertown road last night."

Zigzag, the famous detective, chuckled, and he was fully warranted in doing so. He had secured some valuable knowledge.

Having doffed the character of Uncle Peleg, the verdant farmer from New Hampshire, he had donned that of the eminently respectable representative of a well-known and wealthy jewelry firm on Maiden Lane. Then he ingratiated himself into the favor of the two criminals, whom he was shadowing and from whom he was so desirous of acquiring some information.

It was a daring act on the part even of so skilful a detective as Buckholtz, and no severer test of his ability could be attempted. The end, however, justified the means, for its success could not have been more brilliant.

"There are certain times," thought the officer, as he made his way homeward in the early hours of the Sabbath morning, "when the wisest men become fools. If you will only let a criminal have the chance, he will give himself dead away. You may have to wait, and he may unbosom to some one else beside you, but he is bound to do it, all the same, sooner or later. Mr. Ashman and Buckholtz were a little more previous than I expected. It was all owing to the way the little game of poker went, which is what I played it for."

"Asaph Ashman," repeated the detective, half wonderingly, "is the one that was called 'Ash,' when that little affair took place at the Asheville Bank. Buckholtz was the one who tried to play the part of Fred Melville, but overdid the business by allowing himself to be called by that name twice, instead of once, as was the case with Mr. Ashman."

"Ashman, Ashman," repeated the detective, as if in obedience to a bewildered, wondering frame of mind which rarely seized him; "when we come to get that two hundred thousand dollars—that is if we do—and recover Miss Linden—if we do—it will turn the little town of Asheville upside down, but, if I ain't mistaken, there's another explosion coming behind that which will knock everything else into smithereens and give the whole country a sensation."

Zigzag had been concerned in many startling affairs, but he felt that the present one in some respects was the most unique of them all.

To him it seemed that all the threads for which he had been groping so long were dropping one by one into his hands, and that he had but to wait a short time when the whole skein would be disentangled; wrong would be crushed and justice would prevail.

But none could know better than he the striking truth of the homely declaration that the

best-laid plans often go wrong and that there's many a slip between the cup and lip.

He was as sure of one thing as a mortal can be sure of that which has not yet come to pass—i. e.—that the division of the plunder taken from the vaults of the Asheville Bank would be made at Oak Hall on the coming Monday night.

The original intention was to complete the crime at the Astor House in New York, but the scheme was defeated by a difficulty which few persons would suspect and which at the first blush seems trifling.

The burglars who were all adepts in their profession learned that at least two officers of the law arrived in Asheville early on Friday morning, sooner than they anticipated, and, helped by a perverse fate, they found there was reason to fix suspicion on Oak Hall.

The funds immediately after being stolen, were hidden in a convenient spot—whose location Zigzag could not suspect—there to await the proper time for them to be taken to New York City near which the gang meant to gather and divide the "huddle."

That such was not their intention, or that circumstances might lead them to change their mind, was among the possibilities, but the most sagacious detective that ever lived must take his chances, and, having formed his conclusion, he has no choice left but to act upon it, and leave the results with Providence.

Now, two hundred thousand dollars, composed of greenbacks and gold, must of necessity constitute a large package, that is when most of the bills are of a moderate denomination, as was the case with the plunder taken from the vaults of the Asheville Bank. It might have been easily carried in a strong valise, but certain as the burglars were, that they could not get away from the town without running the gantlet of the officers, Asaph Ashman was only simply prudent when he declined to take the risk.

The funds could be carried to Oak Hall after dark, and there divided, for each man was eager to get his share. There were five persons who were entitled to portions of the plunder, and the reduction in the size of each package by four-fifths would practically remove all danger in getting away unobserved with it, since it could be carried about the person so as to attract no attention.

It was, therefore, a wise decision to follow this course, though there were one or two members of the gang that would not have hesitated to take the entire risk of carrying the whole huddle to the designated room in the New York Hotel.

In the latter case, however, the leaders, and especially Ashman himself, were unwilling to trust those parties with the entire amount; it would be too great a strain upon their honesty.

Reasoning from this standpoint, Zigzag was warranted in believing that the crisis in the business had been shifted forward, like the hand of a clock, to the following Monday night.

What, therefore, did the sagacious detective do?

He went to his city quarters, rolled himself up in bed and never opened his eyes until the following afternoon.

When he awoke, he ate a substantial meal, took a walk and felt as fresh as the morning dew.

In the evening, still preserving his character of the traveling representative of Everingham & Company, he made certain familiar rounds of the city.

The result was satisfactory. He found that Ashman & Buckholtz were enjoying themselves to their fullest bent, in accordance with their own ideas of what constitutes the highest kind of recreation.

We need not enter into particulars. Suffice it to say that the tour of these two individuals included everything that was base, vile, degraded and shocking to a man with any regard for decency. The fact that Ashman the leader was a married man seemed to act rather as an incentive than as a check to his bacchanalian revelry, which was wild enough to sap the health of the most vigorous person who ever indulged in the maddest kind of dissipation.

At a late hour the two were helped to their couches, where they slept the sleep of the fool, until long after the sun had risen, when they awoke with splitting heads, racking brains and a fevered condition of blood which is the well deserved retribution that nature demands from those who violate so flagrantly her laws.

Could this punishment precede the so called enjoyment would any sensible person ever stray from the cool, delightful walk of rectitude and health?

We trow not.

It was late on Monday afternoon, that Ashman and Buckholtz, still weak, trembling and only half recovered from their spree, took the cars for Asheville.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION.

WHEN Saturday evening settled down on the little town of Asheville, Cutt Whitney had reached several important conclusions.

The first of these was that his superior Zigzag

had not only left the place but had not returned. Whither he had gone could only be conjectured, but he believed it was to New York City, a belief, which, as the reader knows, was correct.

Furthermore, Tudor Carew, president of the bank, was also absent ostensibly on a visit to Boston. But wherever he had gone, Cutt was confident he was under the surveillance of Zigzag.

Whitney, however, did not learn of the departure of Buckholtz, that worthy having managed, without any effort on his part, to leave unnoticed on the train.

But the vigilant officer saw the two return on Monday afternoon, and he was confident that Zigzag would soon appear in the town. Of course, it would be in a guise that would deceive every one, excepting possibly the officer who was so anxiously looking for him.

As the surest means of meeting Zigzag, Whitney lit a cigar and seated himself in the office of the hotel, where, without appearing to do so, he could scan every person that entered.

A surprise awaited him.

He had not been seated ten minutes, when a boy hurriedly entered and said something in a low tone to the clerk. The latter pointed with his pen to Whitney who was watching the couple. The youngster looked around a moment, and then walked over to the officer.

"Are you Mr. Whitney?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

Without saying anything more, the lad handed him a sealed envelope, which being opened, disclosed the following:

"MONDAY AFTERNOON.

"MY DEAR WHITNEY:—

"Call at my house at once. I have news of the highest importance. T. CAREW."

"I'll be there right away," remarked Whitney to the waiting messenger, who turned on his heel.

"What the mischief can that mean?" muttered the detective, who went to the wash-room, and tidied himself up before going to the house of the wealthy banker; "why under the sun doesn't Zigzag show up?" he added, scrutinizing each person in turn who was in sight, with the conviction that the one whom he so longed to see had not arrived; "I would like to have his counsel and help, but it won't do to wait."

A few minutes later he was admitted to the house of Tudor Carew, who was sitting in his chair, in the familiar front room up-stairs, looking as though the hasty trip that he had taken to Boston had been an injury rather than a benefit to him.

He seemed right glad to meet his visitor, and apologizing for not rising from the chair, shook him warmly by the hand.

"I am afraid your journey to Boston has been a severe tax upon your strength," remarked the caller, sympathetically.

"Yes, I ought not to have gone, but, after all, it isn't that which has broken me up."

"Ah, is it anything in which I can give you help?"

The banker looked distrustfully around, as if to make sure that neither his wife nor attendant was within ear-shot.

"I wouldn't have her know anything about it for the world," he said, in an undertone, alluding to his wife.

Whitney rose and closed one of the doors which happened to be open. Then he sat down quite near his host, signifying by his manner that he was ready to receive any communication he chose to make.

Observing his hesitation, the visitor, with a view of encouraging him, said:

"I am sure we are quite alone; I received your note telling me that you had some important news, and you will observe that I have not lost much time by the way."

"So I have—so I have," remarked Mr. Carew as if rousing himself by a strong effort; "there! what do you think of that?"

From the inner pocket of the silken wrapper which incased his form, he drew a letter that had been broken open (for it was addressed to the banker) and handed it to his visitor, adding the remark:

"It has broken me all up and I ought to be in bed again."

"Shall I read it?" asked Whitney, glancing at the superscription and affecting an indifference that he was far from feeling.

"Certainly; I sent for you, as soon as I comprehended the meaning of the communication; it is so strange and fearful that I feel I must not make a move without your advice."

Unfolding the missive, Cutt Whitney read the following astounding letter which was without date, although post-marked at Asheville:

"TUDOR CAREW, ESQ.:—

"SIR:—Your niece, Miss Gladys Linden, is within our power and where it is impossible for you or any officers of the law to reach her. She has suffered no harm and will not suffer any, provided you do what we tell you to do. Within the next twenty-four hours you must give us the sum of fifty thousand dollars. If you do not, your niece shall be returned to you within the following twelve hours as unharmed as when she left your roof to go to the party at Ravenswood. If you refuse, you will never again see her alive."

"Now to business. Understand in the first place, that the project of abducting your niece and holding her for ransom was perfected two weeks ago, and it has been carried out in every detail precisely as we planned it."

"This may strike you as a rather daring proceeding, but we have only to remind you that all the detective force of the country was unable to get back the Ross boy after he was stolen in Philadelphia. Had his friends paid the price demanded, they would have got the lad safe and sound. They tried to outwit the parties who held the youngster, and the result was—the boy forever."

"You will catch on. Undertake to play double with us and the same fate will overtake your niece; act square and we will keep our bargain just as Westervelt and the others would have done with Charley Ross."

"We know there are detectives in Asheville, but they and you and your house are watched and will be watched until this job is finished. You can't make a move to defeat us or to put any of them on our track without our knowing it at once, and the first attempt on your part to do so closes the negotiations! Nothing then will save your niece—not even if you offer fifty million dollars. Enough said."

"The all-important question is how shall this be arranged? We will tell you. Put the amount—fifty thousand dollars—in bank-bills in a valise; mount your horse at eleven o'clock Monday evening and ride south over the Beavertown road. Five miles from Asheville, you will reach a small, wooden bridge. You can't miss it, for there is no other one within a mile of it. At the bridge, you will dismount and place the valise under the bridge beside a large stone, which is on the bank of the small stream. You will then remount your horse and continue riding southward. Remember not to turn back, for if any one should accidentally see you, your action might awaken curiosity, but if you ride ahead, others will see nothing noteworthy in what you do."

"You will see no one, but all the same, you will be watched. If you have any companion or any one is observed lurking near, it will be useless for you to leave the valise, for no one will call for it."

"Understand, we cannot be entrapped."

"You can continue southward and find your way back to Asheville by some roundabout road. As soon as you are out of sight and the coast is clear, some one will go forward and pick up the valise. If the sum is found correct, (remember, \$50,000,) Miss Gladys Linden will be under your roof before the set of sun, ready to declare that she never received more courteous treatment in all her life. But if the amount is a single dollar short, if any part of it is bad or is marked, all negotiations are ended. You know what that means!"

"Everything, we trust, has been made clear."

"Us."

After reading this astonishing letter, Cutt Whitney sat motionless with his eyes fixed upon the paper, as he knew the eyes of Tudor Carew were fastened upon him.

He had grasped the full meaning of the communication, but he wished to do a little rapid thinking for himself, before saying anything to his host.

He did it.

Suddenly he leaned back in his chair and looked straight in the countenance of the bank president.

The latter met his gaze unflinchingly, and asked:

"What do you think of it?"

"A high-handed proceeding, indeed! But it looks to me now as if 'Us' holds the winning hand."

"Do you mean to say that there's no escaping such an outrage?" demanded Tudor Carew, flaming up and speaking in a voice loud enough to penetrate every portion of the upper floor. "Am I compelled to pay a whole fortune to save my niece? Where is the power of the law? Is this the nineteenth century?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief it is," calmly replied Cutt Whitney, who had reasons of his own for doubting the sincerity of this indignation.

The bank president sprang from his chair and paced up and down the room, like a man beside himself with rage.

"I'll never consent!" he exclaimed, waving the air with both hands. "It is worse than the brigands of Marathon; it is an infamous outrage! It is a disgrace to the country and age! It is unparalleled! No, sir!" he added, wheeling short about with flashing eyes and shaking his fist at Whitney, as though he believed he was the author of the fearful proposition.

"You must make your own choice," quietly replied the detective. "The proposition is made to you, and it rests with you, therefore, to accept or reject the terms."

"What do you think of it? Tell me that."

"There is little to think about. The terms are plain, and though it is an outrage, that it seems almost incredible any one dare make in this country, nevertheless it is made."

"But—but cannot you defeat the scheme and capture the infernal scoundrels who sent me such a proposition?"

"Their plans have been laid and executed too well."

"What is your advice?"

"To accept the terms and pay the blood-money demanded, for it is simply a choice whether you will give fifty thousand dollars to save the life of your niece, or whether you will hold it back and let her die."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN IMPORTANT CONFERENCE.

DETECTIVE WHITNEY needed no prolonged

study of the manner of Mr. Tudor Carew to become satisfied that most of his indignation was assumed. In fact the officer suspected that his host was not surprised by the reception of the letter; more than that, he was sure of the fact.

"Did this reach you by messenger or through the post-office?"

"There's the envelope," he replied pointing to the yellow cover on the stand at his elbow.

"It was dropped in the Asheville office this morning," said the detective, examining the postmark; "was it delivered after your return from Boston?"

"I found it in my mail, awaiting my return, when I reached home this afternoon."

"Have you any suspicion of the writer?"

"My gracious! how could I know whom to suspect?" demanded Mr. Carew, flushing slightly.

"You have received no callers nor other communications since I was here last?"

"None whatever—that is, from any of these parties."

"Mr. Carew, can you raise fifty thousand dollars on such short notice?"

"Well, yes, it so happens that I happen to have that amount at command just now, but, since we must trust each other fully in this matter, I may as well tell you that the money is not my own."

"Thanking you for your confidence, may I ask who is the owner of the funds?"

"My niece, Miss Linden."

"Then you would simply be taking all of her money—"

"Not all, but a goodly portion," interrupted the banker, with some pride of manner.

"Then you would simply be using a part of her money for her own benefit. In that case, the sum would be justly chargeable against her estate."

An odd light shone in the gray eyes of Tudor Carew.

"Do you think so?"

"Unquestionably I do."

"But how would the courts and the community at large regard such a transaction?"

"There could be but one view of it. Through no fault of yours, your niece is placed in such peril that she would gladly give all her fortune and ten times more, if she had it, to escape. You secure her freedom, by paying a ransom which she can well afford to deduct from her own estate. If you feel able to give that amount to her and choose to do so, no one can question your right; but certainly you are under no obligation to exercise such liberality."

"I wish I were able, but really I am not. So you think—but, Mr. Whitney, is there no way of bringing these scoundrels to justice and saving the money?"

"Yes—the single way of paying for the same with the life of your ward."

"Heavens! it's awful!"

And leaping to his feet, the excited banker paced up and down the apartment like a caged lion.

But he did not deceive his guest. His emotion was counterfeit, and Mr. Cutt Whitney "knew his man."

"Well," finally said the elder, dropping again in his chair, as though exhausted; "I suppose it must be done; yes, I'll do it, for the sake of my beloved niece—poor thing!"

He sopped his eyes for a minute or two with his white silk handkerchief, as though to stay his grief. During this little episode the detective held his peace as if through respect for the other's sorrow.

"Don't you think, Mr. Whitney," suddenly asked the bank president, as though the thought had just occurred to him, "that you can lay some plans to capture these thieves?"

"Mr. Carew," replied Mr. Whitney, sternly, "your grief for the suffering of your daughter beclouds your judgment. Don't you understand that these knaves will be on the watch, and the first attempt of the kind will be the death-warrant of the lady? I beg you to think no more about it."

"Mr. Whitney, I thank you more than I can tell," said the old gentleman, in a choking voice, offering his hand to the caller; "your advice will be followed to the letter."

"That is the only thing that can be done. No doubt I was watched when I came into the house."

"Do you imagine any harm will come from that?"

"I presume not, but nothing more of the kind must be done."

"But what will you do?"

"Nothing; I must keep carefully in the background until the return of your niece. After that we may see whether anything can be done to trace the villains. But they are shrewd, cunning fellows, and depend upon it, they will cover their tracks well. It will be time enough to think of the work of the future when the work of the present is finished."

Nothing more of importance was said, and Cutt Whitney soon after took his departure, having struggled hard to give the impression that he meant to stay at or near his hotel until the conclusion of the negotiations between Tudor Carew and the abductors of his niece.

Without seeming to do so, the detective glanced sharply to the right and left as he came out upon the street. It was beginning to grow dark, and the lamps were few and far between; but by the dim light he was quite sure that he saw the figure of a man beneath one of the bare shade-trees on the opposite side.

It was wise, however, to be ignorant at such times, and, as he strolled down the avenue, his manner did not betray that there was any such thing as suspicion in his mind.

After reaching the hotel, he spent a few minutes in the office and bar-room, on the lookout for any one who might be piping him or for his friend Zigzag. He was not successful in either respect, and as it still lacked a half-hour of the time for tea, he went up-stairs.

Applying his key to his room door, he admitted himself, but started back on seeing that there was an intruder ahead of him.

He was a middle-aged man, dressed somewhat loudly, who seemed to have gotten into the "wrong pew" without suspecting it.

Before anything in the nature of question and explanation could be said, the two shook hands.

"How did you get in, Zig, without the key?" asked Whitney.

His guest held up a piece of bent wire.

"That rarely fails me, though it did the other night at Oak Hall."

"How long have you been here?"

"I arrived about the middle of the afternoon; where's Melville?"

"I guess he's asleep yet. I haven't seen him since we parted Friday night, or rather Saturday morning."

"What about that cipher business?"

"It wasn't he who made the figures. The first page of the ledger was written by another hand, though it was the same one that constructed the cipher."

"Of course; what is his name?"

Whitney looked in the face of Zigzag, and both laughed.

"You know just as well as I do," said the former.

"What else have you to tell me?"

"Considerable; give me your ears."

And thereupon Whitney related to Zigzag the story of his interview with Mr. Tudor Carew, and of the proposed ransom of his niece.

"And so you read the old fellow," remarked Zigzag, without displaying any surprise; "I'm glad to find you had your eyes open. Give me your theory."

"But you insist that a detective should have no theory."

"Not before he enters upon the investigation of a question. After he has learned some facts, he must of necessity form a theory, which after all may be wrong; you have discovered some facts."

"In the first place, then, Mr. Carew, for reasons which will perhaps appear in due time, desires to pay that exorbitant ransom for the return of his niece."

"It does look that way."

"But he wants to make it safe to do so. His wish, therefore, was to learn what I intended to do during the trying time."

"Do you think you deceived him?"

"I am confident I did."

"Did he ask any questions about me?"

"Not a word."

"He knows, nevertheless, that I am in the case, but thinks that if you remain in the background, I will do the same."

"But after all I don't see what good it will do us."

"Cutt, did you study the handwriting of the letter which Mr. Carew showed you?"

"I did."

"What did you make of it?"

"The letter you know was quite long, and, although the writer strove hard to disguise his hand, he could not keep it up at all times. There was a break near the middle which was a dead give away."

"Did you identify it?"

"Unmistakably so. The writer of the letter was—who?"

"The same one who wrote the cipher."

"Of course; Zig, the trail is growing warmer."

"Yes, but there's considerable work to do yet and some of those fellows are mighty shrewd. Cutt, do you know where that bridge is that 'US' speaks about in his letter to Carew?"

"I think I recall it, though I did not pay much attention to it on my way out."

"I remember it clearly, for I caught the toe of my shoe in one of the rotten planks and came so near falling that I'm afraid I uttered a naughty word. Well, when Mr. Tudor Carew stops to put that valise and the money under the bridge, I'll be there."

"What! under the bridge?"

"As sure as you live."

"It will not do; it will upset all our plans."

"Not a bit of it; they're trying a little game of bluff."

"But how can you get there?"

"I'll find a way; stay here till I am out of the way; we must be strangers before others; I'm off, good night!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A NIGHT SCOUT.

ZIGZAG stepped briskly to the door of the room, as if about to pass out, but, with his hand upon the knob, turned sharply about, and, without speaking, smiled at his companion.

There was a world of meaning in the look, and it said as plainly as words could say:

"Cutt, I want you to examine my make-up critically, and to tell me what you think of it."

Whitney held his hand horizontally across his forehead, as if to shade his eyes, while taking a survey of the other.

"Do you catch on, Cutt?"

"I reckon."

"What do you think of it?"

"It would deceive his own mother. Then you had something like this in your mind when you came to Asheville?"

"It couldn't have been *that*, for I had no knowledge of any proposed attempt on the part of Mr. Carew, but the general principle, so to speak, was the same."

The sagacious reader has been told enough to understand that Zigzag had determined upon a daring course, before the information of Cutt Whitney pointed out the precise turn which his essay should take.

What that course was, as well as its result, will be speedily made known.

"You know where that old Revolutionary house stands at the eastern end of the town, Cutt?"

"The one built of Holland bricks, and almost hidden by shrubbery?"

"The same."

"I do."

"You will be there exactly at seven o'clock, on the right hand side of the road. At that hour an open wagon will drive up to the pavement, and you will climb into the rear as lively as you know how. You will keep out of sight until we are beyond the town."

"I'll be there on time."

"By-by."

"So-long."

Just as the wheezy old town clock began clanging the hour of seven, Cutt Whitney, who was sauntering along the street in front of the Revolutionary structure already described, caught the hurried rattle of wheels, and, looking over his shoulder, saw an open spring-wagon, driven by one person, slowing its pace and turning to the right, so as to reach the walk very near the spot where he stood.

During the few minutes that preceded the coming of this vehicle, the detective had taken a number of observations with extreme care. The result was the certainty that no suspicious eyes were watching his movements.

He had seen his old acquaintance, Ben Jones, hanging around the bar-room, as if expecting some one, but he easily kept out of his way, and was absolutely sure that no one was shadowing him.

Therefore, when the wagon drew up, he followed instructions and climbed into the rear. As he expected, Zigzag was stretched out on the straw and buffalo-robe in the bottom, apparently as much at ease as if swinging in his hammock under the summer trees.

The night was windy and crisp, but it was not so clear as were the two preceding evenings. The sky was full of drifting clouds, and the light of the moon was obscured so often that it became treacherous and uncertain.

This was satisfactory to the officers, for it will be remembered that they had more light than they wished three nights before. The scheme of Zigzag was one which promised better success in the darkness than in the light.

The instant Whitney entered the wagon, he stretched out so that his head did not show above the side, and reclined face to face with Zigzag who had an ulster that reached from his head to his heels.

"Does it correspond?" asked Whitney, as the wagon rattled out toward the country.

"Exactly; it is a twin brother of his."

"Good! who is driving?"

"Don't you know him?"

Whitney looked up sharply from the bottom of the vehicle at the man who was holding the lines. He could see little beside his back. There was enough light to show that he had on a coarse common coat, and his cap was such as many farmers wear in the autumn of the year, when they can be bought at a trifling cost.

It was impossible to identify him from such a view.

"I say, driver."

In answer the man looked around.

"I thought so," laughed Whitney, as he recognized Fred Melville. "We three are together again; are there to be any more?"

"That's enough."

"But there are four or five of them."

"And one or two will not count for much. I tell you, Cutt, that when an officer has got the drop and the law on his side, he's mighty powerful and you will be kind enough not to allow it to fade from your recollection."

"We are not on the Beavertown highway."

"No, sir; not by a large majority, but we soon shall be."

"Suppose you enlighten me a little as to your plans, now that we have fairly started on the road."

"They are simple. Melville is familiar with the country for a dozen miles around Asheville. We will drive out about four miles to the house of a friend of his. There we'll put up the team and then cut across the country for a little more than a mile. That will bring us to the Beavertown road, or rather will bring me there for I am the only one to make the full journey."

"How is that?"

"The selection of that bridge for the depositary of the fifty thousand dollars is wise except in one important respect; it can be approached by a stranger, who, by using sufficient care, may escape discovery. But I presume they could not have done better."

"And you intend to avail yourself of that means?"

"Precisely; that valise with its contents is to be *mine*, and I'm ready to take the responsibility."

"But how is it the hiding-place can be reached so readily?"

"The road over which we are now traveling diverges, like the spoke of a wheel, from the Beavertown highway. By going about a mile across lots, you can reach one from the other. Less than two hundred yards from the important bridge is a stretch of woods. Through these woods, winds a small brook, which continues across the meadow and under the bridge and so on, until I suppose that in the end and through a dozen different channels, it debouches into the Atlantic Ocean."

"How will that brook help you?"

"It has wound its way across the meadow for so many years, that it has worn a hollow fully two feet deep—enough for a man to creep the entire distance without detection from any one unless he happens to be in the depression itself."

The plan of Zigzag we have said, was quite simple, being that of reaching the bridge by means of what may be called a cut, and securing the enormously valuable valise that Tudor Carew had agreed to deposit there at eleven o'clock that night.

Since it was to be expected that one of the gang would speedily reach the spot on the same errand, it can be seen that an interesting complication was quite sure to take place.

While Zigzag was thus engaged, Melville and Whitney were simply to await in the woods the return of their leader. He gave them to understand that there was but one way in which they could help him, and that was by keeping "hands off."

There could be no doubt that any attempt to reach the bridge by means of the Beavertown road would be certain of detection, or at least of suspicion, which amounted to the same thing. So the officers were wise to yield all thought of any such thing.

Safely beyond sight of Asheville, the two lighted their cigars and assumed the sitting position, a conversation following in which all three took part.

Zigzag explained his experience in New York and gave it as his opinion that they would be able to make a prodigious haul that night, though he reminded the enthusiastic Melville that many obstacles were likely to intervene between them and success.

The detective had laid out his line of action, when returning from New York that Monday afternoon. He felt that it would be a rash thing for him and Whitney to make a descent upon the gang without assistance, even though he was confident of weakening the opposing force by effecting a division of them.

Three assailants, armed and with the law on their side, would be enough, and Fred Melville was just the one needed. He was almost in a fever of terror over the prolonged absence of Gladys, but his relief was inexpressible when Zigzag assured him that she was absolutely safe and unharmed, and doubtless would remain so for some time to come.

With such a man at his elbow, the only difficulty would be to restrain his ardor and courage, which would lead him to take all possible risks for the sake of his beloved, or that he might punish those who had offered her the indignity.

There was plenty of time at command, and the three friends found the conversation so interesting that the horse was drawn down to a slow walk and it was almost eight o'clock, when Fred Melville turned the animal over to the care of his friend, to whom he explained that they were out on a little business which they desired to keep secret.

The friend had much less curiosity than the average countryman and merely wished them good luck.

Melville had roamed over the section so many times when a boy that every feature of the landscape was as well-known to him as was the furniture in his own bedroom. There was no hesitancy, therefore, on his part when he took the position of leader.

By the uncertain light of the moon, he led the way into the woods, and then turned a little to the left.

"Yes, here it is," he said in explanation, as they struck a path among the trees; "I believe that has been there for a hundred years. My grandfather remembered it when he was a boy and there were all sorts of stories to account for it. Here we are!"

This exclamation came a moment later, when they reached the brook at a point so near the meadow, that the open space beyond was in plain sight.

Twenty steps to the right, brought the three to the margin of the wood, where there was a vigorous growth of bushes and shrubbery.

"Here is a good spot to do some waiting," remarked Zigzag, throwing himself upon the ground, like one who has several idle hours on his hands.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"EUREKA!"

FROM the position of the friends reclining in the margin of the wood, they could obtain only occasional and unsatisfactory glimpses of the Beavertown highway.

By lying flat on their faces when the moon happened to be clear, they were able to trace the shadowy outlines of the public road as marked by the line of fence which bounded that portion. The young, bright eyes of Fred Melville more than once discerned the bridge quite plainly when it was only indistinctly seen by the others.

It was natural at such times that they should fancy they saw persons and horses when no such objects existed. The leisure, too, offered a great advantage, since it allowed Zigzag to explain more fully his plans than he would have done had it been otherwise.

During these hours he gave the minutest particulars of his experience in New York, the story opening wide the eyes of Fred Melville, who gained a knowledge of human wickedness and hypocrisy such as he had never before suspected.

The advantage in one respect will be perceived. When the time came to move, the three knew precisely what was to be done, or rather what they were to try to do.

Twice while waiting they heard persons cross the bridge. The first time a heavy wagon drawn by two horses rattled over, and the second time it was a carriage drawn by a single horse. There was no reason to believe that in either case the burglars were interested.

And so it came about, at half-past ten o'clock, when Zigzag whispered that he was going to make a start, no sign of their enemies had been seen or heard.

The detective took the best survey possible of the ground in front of him, and then, crouching down like an Indian scout, began his toilsome advance toward the rickety bridge.

It need not be said that Melville and Whitney watched the movements of their friend with the closest interest. They could see his head and shoulders quite plainly, as he crept stealthily away from them and in the direction of the bridge. Once or twice, when his bare head showed above the level of the ground, Whitney uttered a hissing sound as a warning for him to be more careful; but Zigzag knew what he was doing and did not require the caution.

The course of the stream was comparatively straight for the first part of the way, but it was not long before there was enough curve to shut their friend from sight.

Several times Fred thought he detected the crown of his head slowly following the course of the brook, but Whitney would not believe it, for, aside from the difficulty of seeing such an object distinctly at that distance, he was sure that Zigzag, as he neared the bridge, would use the utmost care.

He was correct in this opinion of the skill of his friend, for Geronimo himself could not have been more careful than he.

It was a task of no little difficulty to advance in the manner described. There were places where the depression of the banks was so slight that he had to lie flat on his face and move after the manner of a turtle. At times his hands and then his feet were in the icy waters and mud of the brawling brook, and then there would come stretches where the progress was quite easy.

Nothing was to be feared from the approach of an enemy by way of the rear, so he devoted all his attention to the front and especially did he keep the bridge under the closest inspection.

It would have been absurd on the part of Zigzag to smoke his cigar, but when at last with a sigh of relief, he crawled underneath the structure, he cautiously struck a match and looked at his watch.

He was pleased to see that it lacked but a few minutes of eleven o'clock. While this showed that he had taken more time than he suspected in reaching the spot, it proved also that he had not long to wait, provided Mr. Tudor Carew was prompt in keeping his engagement.

The bridge, which was destined to play its part in the events we are describing, was an ordinary affair, such as are common in all parts of the country to-day. It consisted simply of a score or more of planks, laid upon strong beams, extending from bank to bank of the

brook protected above by a single guard-rail on each side.

Since the brook was liable to occasional overflows, the freeholders who built the bridge caused the planking to stand perhaps six feet above the brook at "low tide," while its width was about twice as great. Thus Zigzag found abundance of room beneath, though he would have been glad had there been still more in which to stow himself away.

The banks beneath the structure sloped downward to the middle, where the small stream flowed quietly along, so that the man, large as he was, was able to squeeze himself quite close to one end of the structure.

Before doing so, he easily located the large stone beside which, as Whitney had told him, the President of the Asheville Bank had promised to place the valise containing fifty thousand dollars.

Since the clouds were often obscured, it will be understood that when Zigzag had forced himself as far back as he could, he was in darkness, where it was impossible for any one to see him without artificial aid.

The officer felt no fear of Tudor Carew, for he was not likely to make any search or to do more than simply leave the treasure, but according to the terms of the latter, one of the gang was to come to the spot and take away the valise, presumably a very short time after the departure of the banker.

Now, if he should take it into his head to appear within a few minutes, how was an encounter between him and Zigzag to be avoided?

In the event of his being on time, it may be said that such a collision was certain and Zigzag was prepared for it.

But the wary officer did not believe the fellow would put in an appearance for an indefinite period. In fact, it was difficult to see how he could do so, since he must have been discovered if in the vicinity, and the closest watch of Zigzag and his friends had failed to detect him.

The truth was, Zigzag had formed his "theory," in the light of very recent events, and he did not believe he was running near as much risk as would be supposed.

According to his view, the danger was to come shortly after and in an altogether different latitude.

These thoughts were running rapidly through the brain of the sagacious officer, when he caught a sound like the clump of a horse's hoof. The next instant he was sure of it.

Rattle-bang! came a noise on the planks overhead shaking them so violently that the dust sifted down on the crown and shoulders of the eaves-dropper, and it seemed as if the whole structure itself was on the point of tumbling about its ears.

But the clatter and rattle was brief and the steed struck the solid ground beyond, apparently without any abatement of his pace.

"I really believe the old fellow doesn't mean to stop," was the thought of Zigzag, dissipated the next moment, by a distinct "*Whoa!*" which he recognized as the voice of Tudor Carew, President of the Asheville Bank.

The old gentleman spoke several more times to his animal, which appeared to be somewhat frisky. Soon, however, he quieted him, and then stepped to the ground.

Zigzag was all eyes and ears.

He heard the man walk across the planking and then step over the guard, so as to approach the bridge from the side where he was crouching. He saw a pair of slim legs, as shown below the lines of the planking at the end. When more and more of them came into sight, the lower part of a heavy overcoat was visible, until, as the owner stepped near the edge of the brook, he could be observed to his waist.

Standing thus, he stooped over to peer under, as if looking for something.

At this moment, it so happened that the clouds in front of the moon swept past, and the shoulders and face of the man who bent down were in plain view.

Zigzag, cowering in the gloom and as motionless as the big stone at the feet of Tudor Carew, was hidden from sight.

The detective observed a valise grasped in the gloved hand of the old gentleman, and he fancied that it bulged as though it was almost full of something.

Bending over, Carew remained motionless a minute or so and then asked in a husky voice:

"Hello, Buck, are you there?"

Of course there was no answer to this summons, which pleased the listening Zigzag more than would be suspected. It was his belief that Buckholtz was to be the messenger that would come to claim the valise, and he had gotten himself up in as close imitation of him as possible. Had any other party come for it, Zigzag would have been prepared for him as well.

"Are you there, Buck?"

There being no response to the second summons, Tudor Carew actually gave utterance to an impatient oath, whereat the listening Zigzag smiled broadly.

"All right," muttered the old gentleman, carefully depositing the valise beside the large stone; "I've kept my part of the contract."

Then he withdrew up the sloping bank,

climbed over the guard, crossed the bridge, remounted his horse and struck him into a gallop.

It was in accordance with his agreement also that, instead of turning his animal about and riding back to Asheville, he should keep him headed in the southerly direction, and at the same sweeping pace with which he had approached, he speedily swept out of sight.

It was not necessary for Zigzag to peer around from underneath the bridge to make sure of this, for he was as certain of it, as though his eyes beheld every movement.

But the detective lost no time. Squeezing himself forward from his cramped quarters, he had but to creep a short distance when his outstretched hand rested on the valise.

"Eureka!" he muttered when he actually closed his fingers around the curving leather handles at the top by which it was carried; "*I have found it!*"

CHAPTER XXXII.

\$50,000 VERSUS \$0.

It was a strange sensation that came over Zigzag the detective, when, from his hiding-place beneath the old bridge he grasped the valise, which there was reason to believe contained fifty thousand dollars, the price of the ransom demanded for the life of Miss Gladys Linden.

"I said 'Eureka,'" he muttered, "a moment ago, but I'm by no means certain that I had warrant in doing so. There surely is a bulky package within, but it remains to be examined."

And to do that it was necessary to make his way back by the laborious and tedious process that he had approached.

The officer was disposed to rebel, for it would have been so vastly easier for him to walk straight across the open space to the woods, where his friends were awaiting him, and the chances were ten to one against his being seen by unfriendly eyes.

But he would have been a poor representative of his profession had he allowed himself to be tempted aside by any fear of discomfort.

So, crouching down, while still beneath the planking of the bridge, he began his laborious return, taking as much pains, as though he had to pick his way within a short distance of a camp of hostile Indians.

The waiting was as tiresome to Melville and Whitney as to the one to whom it brought so much labor and toil.

They plainly saw the horseman gallop across the bridge, and halt on the other side, where he dismounted and came back valise in hand, though the latter object was hardly discernible at that distance.

Of course the two friends observed him also when he remounted and rode off.

"You know where he is going?" remarked Whitney inquiringly.

"To Oak Hall."

"No doubt of it."

"Why go to the bother of leaving the valise, when he might as well have taken it with him?"

"Tudor Carew is too shrewd to make any such slip as that. Despite all my promises to him, he is apprehensive that I will be on the watch somewhere. I have no doubt that he looked searchingly at these woods, when approaching and leaving the bridge."

"He may have discovered Zigzag underneath."

"Zigzag was in no danger, for who but him would have thought of such an audacious proceeding? He must be on his way back to us."

"But where," asked the puzzled Fred Melville, "is the fellow who was to claim the treasure? I should have thought he would have been ready to run forward before Carew was out of sight?"

"I doubt whether you will see him," was the significant reply of the detective.

"But fifty thousand dollars is a large sum to leave lying loose in the night time."

"Yes, so it is," sarcastically commented Whitney, who was scanning the course of the brook, in the hope of catching sight of their friend on his way back.

"Now, if there is some one lurking near," continued Fred, who was much more nervous than his companion, "nothing is more likely than that he would appear pretty near where we are."

"You are right," responded Whitney, as if he feared they were becoming too careless; "we must keep close to the ground, where we are less likely to be seen."

"Maybe I was mistaken, but I think I heard something moving over the leaves behind us."

Both looked behind them, and were silent for a minute or two, but did not detect anything to warrant alarm. They were inclined to believe that it was only the night-wind stirring the limbs or the leaves upon the ground.

Before the question could be answered beyond a doubt, the figure of a man rose to view from between the banks of the brook that had been an object of interest so long. He was but a few steps away, and held a valise in hand.

Casting one quick glance around, he crouched down again and quickly ran the brief, interven-

ing space, darting among the trees almost as silently as a shadow.

"Whew! I'm deuced glad it's over!" he exclaimed, dropping on the ground beside his friends.

"You did well, Zig, for I see you have the bag with you."

"Yes, and what do you bet on the amount inside?" asked the detective in a quizzical manner.

"I'll bet the even fifty thousand is there, and that it came out of the vaults of the Asheville Bank," replied Fred Melville.

"I'll bet the contents of the valise that there's no money in it at all," was the somewhat bewildering wager of Cutt Whitney.

"Just hold on to the documents while I take a look around," said Zigzag, passing the bag to Whitney and rising to his feet.

It was a wise precaution in the officer to make a circuit of the spot before examining the contents of the valise.

Zigzag came back in a few minutes with the pleasing assurance that no strangers were near them.

"Now we'll soon know the truth," he added, taking the bag across his knees, as he resumed his seat on the ground; "I fooled with it to that extent on the way that I opened the lock with my bent wire; that was to save time. Now, Cutt, strike a light."

The other scraped one of the crackling matches along the side of his trousers, and shaded the tiny flame with his hand until it grew into a vigorous little blaze. Then he and Fred Melville leaned forward with bated breath and watched developments.

It required several matches, but Whitney was so attentive, that he kept up a continuous light, and no interruption took place in the momentous investigation.

Throwing open the capacious mouth of the valise, the hearts of all gave a flutter as they caught sight of a large package, wrapped about with coarse paper, and tied with twine, just as large amounts of money are sometimes secured.

"By gracious! I believe it's there!" exclaimed Whitney.

"Of course it is," added Melville, trembling with excitement: "you were wrong, Zigzag."

But the great detective was the coolest of them all, though even he must have felt a faint additional flutter of the heart.

The string was tied in a bow-knot, which, instead of snapping apart, as he could have readily done, he deliberately untied.

"There you are!"

A roll of thick paper, cut in the shape of the ordinary bank bill, was all that met their view.

"Green goods!" exclaimed the disgusted Whitney.

"Examine further," said Melville.

Zigzag did so, only to find that the valise did not contain a single dollar!

And it was precisely what that officer expected.

"He laughed in his hearty but silent way, until his shoulders shook and his head hopped up and down like a Jack-in-the-box."

"Now," he remarked, as he flung the stuff back in the valise, which he clicked together, "you begin to see the whole plot of this precious gang of scoundrels."

And in truth they did, as the reader himself shall speedily see.

"Well, well," sighed the dumfounded Fred Melville, "I couldn't believe that what you told us awhile ago could be true. It is the strangest thing I ever knew."

"Do you refer to the fraud in the amount of the money?"

"No, but to the amazing plot; it will make a sensation through the country when it becomes known."

"Which it will do within the next twelve hours. Now for Oak Hall. The time has come to strike."

"But, Zig," whispered Whitney, as their leader was on the point of rising from the ground, "it seems incredible to me that no one should appear to claim the valise and pretended package of money."

"Haven't I confiscated it?"

"But some of the gang—"

"Sh!" interrupted Melville, raising his hand as a warning for them to hold their peace.

There was no mistake this time. Some person was picking his way among the trees and through the undergrowth behind them, and approaching the spot where the three were seated on the ground, pretty well hidden by the trunks and undergrowth.

As if that was not enough notice, the newcomer announced himself in characteristic fashion.

"I'll be gol-darned! if that ain't the second time I've had a limb catch me under the chin and almost saw my neck off!"

It was the voice of Ben Jones, the farmer that had played it so cleverly on Cutt Whitney some nights before.

He whispered the identity of the man to the others, and was about to rise to his feet, when Zigzag laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Let me attend to him," he whispered, coming to a standing position, as deftly as a trained athlete.

He had but to take a few steps toward the approaching figure, when he was observed by Ben Jones who stopped and awaited his approach.

"I thought you was goin' to let me 'tend to it," said the farmer; "if I'd knowed you was comin', I wouldn't have bothered to tramp all the way round Robin Hood's barn."

"I changed my mind and concluded to run down and get the valise myself."

"Why didn't you tell me, so as to save the trouble?" growled Ben, evidently impatient because of his useless walk.

"Because I didn't change my mind until just after you were out of the way."

"Wal, did you git the valise?"

"Of course; I left it on the ground out there. Did Carew reach Oak Hall all right?"

"I s'pose so, but how could I know without goin' there?" asked Ben, still surly over the evident fact that he had taken a long and laborious journey for nothing.

"Can't you be a little pleasanter?" demanded the other; "you are as bad as a bear with a sore head."

"Wal, I'm gettin' tired of this whole hanged business."

"What's the matter now?"

"You've been promisin' me money so long that I think it's 'bout time I seen the color of it."

"Wait till we divvy to-night and you shall have more than you ever set eyes on afore."

"That's what I've heard so often that I'm gettin' tired of it," said Ben, who, nevertheless, was somewhat mollified by the dazzling promise of the other.

"I won't ask you to wait any longer—honest Injin."

"All right," replied Ben, with a sigh of relief.

"Now, what do you want me to do?"

"Let's see; what was the arrangement? I've got so many things to think about that I can't be sure I have everything straight."

"Why, I was to come down at half-past eleven and git the blamed old carpetsack under the bridge, and take it hum with me."

"Yes, that is so; it slipped my mind; I'll save you the trouble, and take it with me. What else?"

"Nothin'; what could there be?"

"Then you were to come around in the morning and get your share. Be sure and come early."

"You just bet your life I will!"

"Say, Ben, how is the young lady?"

"All right, as far as I know; I told you that once afore this evenin'. I guess your mem'ry is totterin', ain't it?"

"I do seem to get things mixed up; but never mind; it's getting late, and you can now go home and sleep the sleep of the righteous."

"What are you goin' to do?"

It struck Zigzag that Mr. Jones was somewhat impertinent for one in his situation. His employer probably did not know how to handle him.

"I've a little private business that I want to attend to."

"All right," growled the other. "Now, I'll take another five-mile tramp hum ag'in, where I might as well have stayed all the time."

With that, he passed through the woods, almost stumbling over Melville and Whitney without seeing them, as he strode toward the main road and so on homeward.

Zigzag had purposely made himself up to resemble Aaron Buckholtz. Knowing the scoundrel well, he had no difficulty in imitating his voice and manner.

The perfect success of this piece of impersonation was proven by the fact that he had met and talked for several minutes with Ben Jones, without the latter dreaming that he was any other than Aaron Buckholtz himself.

And Zigzag had managed the interview with such coolness and skill that he succeeded in extracting much valuable information.

"Now, boys," he chuckled, after Mr. Benjamin Jones had faded from sight in the autumn evening, "we advance on Oak Hall."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT OAK HALL.

FROM the moment Tudor Carew mounted his horse and rode out of Asheville over the Beavertown road, he kept an unremitting watch to the right and left, and indeed in every direction.

The moonlight, as we have explained elsewhere, was treacherous and uncertain, and the elderly banker never made better use of his power of vision than on that occasion.

Knowing the detective as he did, he feared that he would attempt some game to entrap the parties who would come to claim the valise, and he was anxious above everything else to prevent that.

Remounting his horse, he struck him into a still more rapid pace, for Carew was a good rider, and by this time he had become convinced that Detective Whitney was honest in his pledge to refrain from interfering with his plans.

All doubt being removed on that point, he swung along at such a pace that it was hardly half-past eleven when he turned the head of his

horse into the lane leading to Oak Hall, not drawing rein until in front of the broad porch where he had alighted many times before.

He evidently was expected, for Jud Dalrymple issued from the door before the banker could place his hand on the knob, and hardly pausing long enough to greet him, took charge of his horse.

Entering the broad hall, Mr. Carew walked straight through to the rear portion, where he opened the same door from which he had issued three nights before, and which in many respects resembled the apartment that he left at that time.

On the round table near the middle were wine, brandy and cigars, while a wood fire in the open hearth in front, diffused a pleasant warmth through the room which was shut so closely from the keen air without that little in the way of fire was needed.

In various indolent attitudes about the room—one being stretched upon the lounge—were Aaron Buckholtz, Matt Hardy and Jack Tovey. All were smoking cigars, and they had sipped liberally from the alcohol, though not to the extent of showing any effect therefrom.

They returned the off-hand greeting of the new arrival in the same manner, and, before saying anything special, he helped himself to a liberal dose from the brandy bottle.

Then he drew off his overcoat and gloves, and, extending his bony fingers toward the cheerful fire, remarked that the night was chilly, thinking it necessary to emphasize the statement with a round oath that would have shocked every person in Asheville, could the population have overheard it.

Not until Dalrymple returned, was there anything like a business talk. Buckholtz had in fact told about all that Carew had to tell, excepting the fact that the latter had deposited the valise beneath the bridge, in accordance with the plan so carefully formed a couple of days before.

"I sent Jones around through the woods to get it," added Buckholtz; "I told him to be sure and follow the brook through the woods, for I knew that if any of the flies were watching, it would be there, for that was the only place, where there was a chance for them."

"When was he to go?"

"So as not to reach the spot too early because there was no hurry. I told him in case he saw anything suspicious—and you know they don't make them much smarter than him—he was to hurry here and let us know."

"But if he don't see anything?"

"He is to go home and to bed."

"So, if he doesn't show up here we shall know it is all right?"

"That's the understanding."

"Very well," remarked Tudor Carew, compressing his thin lips and shaking his head, like a person in whose mind there remained not a particle of doubt; "he won't be here."

"How can you know that?" asked Tovey, the others joining in the query by their looks.

"I fixed Whitney so that a million dollars wouldn't tempt him to come within a mile of the bridge before to-morrow."

"But what about Zigzag? We've more reason to fear him than all the rest together."

"Well," replied Carew, turning his back to the fire and loosely folding his hands behind him, "he is a tough one and no mistake; but he's out of this."

"Don't be too sure of that," was the sensible remark of Buckholtz; "there's no saying where that fellow is or where he isn't."

"He was in Asheville, as I know, and he went to New York Saturday. We have had the depot watched so closely that it was impossible for him to get back without detection. Of course," added the banker, "he may have found some means of entering the town without discovery, but if so, he has put himself in communication with Whitney, who will not let him interfere, where he is likely to do so much injury to his friends."

"There has been one slip," said Buckholtz, "though it is not such an important one after all."

"What is that?"

"We haven't been able to fix it on young Melville. You know that during the little affair at the bank on Thursday night, I was addressed as 'Fred,' once or twice. That, with the fact that he was one of the only three persons who knew the combination ought to have been enough to jug him, but it don't seem to have done so."

"And why not?"

Buckholtz shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll be hanged if I know; 'previous good character' perhaps."

"The thing isn't through yet," was the truthful observation of Matt Hardy; "with such a clear case against him, the detectives may think it best to hold off awhile and troll him along until they have the deadwood on him."

"What makes Jud so long?" asked Carew, glancing at the door as though he expected to see the man enter while they were talking.

"It is time he was here," added Jack Tovey; "shall I go out to look for him?"

"Wait a few minutes longer," replied Carew.

"I tell you," remarked Buckholtz, rising to

his feet and speaking with great earnestness, "there's one thing that must be done before we finish this business."

All looked inquiringly at him.

"It is well enough to think the detectives are thrown off the track and I can't see how it is possible that that infernal Zigzag is in Asheville, but I'm uneasy. To-night we are to make the final divvy and break up until it is safe to come together again. We ought to make sure that none of the officers are anywhere in the neighborhood before we bring out the hoodle. Suppose that at the exact minute they should make a raid. They're suspicious of the house, as we all know."

"You always were cautious, Buck, but it is as well. I'll go out and tell Jud to signal for Jones to come over and stand guard."

"He has hardly had time to get back from the bridge."

"He will soon be home."

Tudor Carew passed out of the room through the hall and out of the front door. On the threshold, he encountered Dalrymple with a lighted lantern in hand.

"What has kept you so long?" asked the banker.

"I don't like the looks of things."

"What have you seen?"

"Nothing, but we ought to have some one on the watch. This is a big night, Mr. Carew and it won't do to slip up."

"I came out to tell you to signal for Jones."

"It is almost time he was back from down the road and I will call him."

In front of his station, the trees that lined the lane were open, so that an unobstructed view was had of the house of Ben Jones a quarter of a mile away.

Dalrymple began swaying the lantern back and forth, and up and down, in a series of signals that were sure to be understood by Ben Jones, provided he caught sight of them.

Tudor Carew kept his position by the side of Dalrymple and watched the result.

After telegraphing for several minutes, his companion stopped and awaited the result.

So far as could be seen, no one in the little farm-house observed the gyrating light, though a faint, star-like point from the building, showed that some one was astir.

The signals were repeated and continued for more than half an hour, until the impatient Carew declared that if the lazy farmer had got back from his journey, he had gone to sleep and could not be aroused before the morrow.

"We might have had the business finished long ago," growled the banker, "and I could have been home and in bed. Let's go in and wind up the whole thing."

"Hold on! there he is!"

Sure enough, the answering signal was caught at that moment. The bright point appeared at the side of Jones's house, whirled about, swung from side to side and went up and down in a way that brought a smile to the faces of the two spectators.

"That's Ben," whispered Dalrymple.

"What does he say?"

"He'll be here as soon as he can."

"He's an honest fellow and we must remember him when we close up this business."

"Shall I wait here till he comes?"

"Does he understand what is wanted of him? That is, does he know from the signals which you have made that he is needed to mount guard for awhile?"

"Oh yes; he and I have it down fine; he knows just as well what is required as if we had an hour's explanation with him."

"Then what is the use of losing more time? At this rate, we won't get through before morning. Come in with me."

Unscrewing the bottom of the lamp, Dalrymple blew out the light and followed Tudor Carew inside Oak Hall.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ADVANCE.

HAVING decided to "march on" to Oak Hall, Zigzag and his friends did not loiter by the way.

The valise, with its bulky package of waste paper, was left lying in the woods, where the parties could return and claim it should it become necessary in the course of subsequent events. As the matter stood, it was idle to in-cumber themselves with it.

Warm work was at hand, and they did not intend to be handicapped beyond the point that was absolutely necessary.

They were considerably annoyed by the fact that Ben Jones was traveling over the same highway on foot, and not very far in advance of them. Since it had been proven that he was in the employ of the gang, and that he was a shrewd watchful fellow, it was all-important that his suspicions should not be awakened.

If he should catch sight of three men coming along the road behind him, he would be quite likely to stop and investigate.

The matter was adjusted with considerable cleverness.

Zigzag took the lead, with Melville and Whitney so far in the rear that he was barely visible to them, the understanding being that these

relative positions should be retained until they came in sight of Oak Hall.

If Zigzag detected a single man in the road, he would do so before his friends to the rear could see or be seen by the stranger. A low whistle would warn Whitney and Melville to stop and keep out of sight.

If Ben Jones should turn about to investigate, Zigzag had only to maintain the character of Buckholtz, which he had already assumed with such success, and Jones would fail to "smell a mouse."

But the farmer made a great deal better time than the trio supposed, for, though they walked fast, they came in sight of the long, dark line which marked the boundary of the lane leading to Oak Hall, and the mass of thick vegetation beyond without once catching a glimpse of him.

As the familiar landmarks were recognized, Zigzag slackened his gait so that his friends joined him almost at the moment of reaching the entrance to the narrow by-road.

There was no halt until they stood in the deep shadow of the trees where they had held their consultation some nights before.

"Now," whispered Zigzag, "there can be no doubt that they are all in there and we're going to settle matters to-night; but—hello!"

This exclamation was caused by the sight of Dalrymple's lantern swinging up and down and from side to side, in the manner already described.

"That's another call to Jones," remarked Whitney.

"Yes, and he will soon answer, for he must have reached his home some time ago."

"There it comes!" whispered Melville a minute later, for Dalrymple had been telegraphing a considerable while, when first seen by the little company that so cautiously entered the mouth of the lane.

"What do you suppose that means?" asked Melville; "has Jones found out the trick played on him and does he mean to put them on their guard?"

"It can't be that," replied Whitney, "for he would have stopped at Oak Hall, inasmuch as he had to pass by it."

"Then, too, added Zigzag, "the first signal was made here; so it is a call from Oak Hall to Jones instead of from him to the gang. I shouldn't be surprised if they want to bring him down to help keep watch while they attend to matters within."

It will be seen that the sagacious detective had hit the bull's-eye the first time.

Since our friends had several hours of darkness before them, they kept within their place at the mouth of the lane, until something definite could be learned concerning Benjamin Jones.

"It won't do for him to see all three of us," said Zigzag, "so do you move a little closer to the house, stopping where you are sure you are invisible from either direction, while I stay here and receive Jones."

The advice was followed.

The next minute the keen eyes of Zigzag discerned the shadowy figure of a man approaching from the direction of the farmer's residence. He was walking in the middle of the road and was recognized as the gentleman himself, as he turned into the lane.

He had come but a few paces, when Zigzag, still personating Aaron Buckholtz, stepped silently out and confronted him.

"It's too bad to call you from your house, Ben," said the detective, sympathetically, "but we need you, and here's something to buy a new dress with, for the better-half."

The rebellious words that were on the lips of the farmer were extinguished by the sight of a crisp new greenback which was thrust into his hand. Holding it close to his nose, his heart gave a throb of delight as he faintly recognized the figure "X" upon it.

"That makes everything lovely," said the delighted fellow; "I'm at your service; all you've got to do is to tell me what you want."

"I want you to stand right where you are and watch for strangers; I don't think there will be any along, but we mustn't take too many chances to-night."

"I reckon I'd better go nearer the house," suggested Ben, making a move in that direction.

"Not a foot closer," was the emphatic order of the supposed Buckholtz; "there's no danger from any direction except the highway, and you must stay right here."

"All right; consider that I've stood here for a week."

"If you see anything that looks or sounds strange up at the house, never mind, but stay in this spot, unless I call to you; do you understand?"

"I would be a fool if I didn't understand; I'm anchored here as long as you want me."

"Very well; be assured you will not be forgotten; good-by."

Zigzag passed up the lane, quickly vanishing from sight among the dense shadows. Looking back and seeing nothing of the duped sentinel, he whispered to Whitney and Melville to follow him.

They did so, the three halting within a dozen yards of the porch where Jud Dalrymple had swung his lantern only a short time before.

"Now," said he, "we must make sure of the lay of the land, before we venture inside. Wait till I make the circuit of the building."

"Don't take many hours to do it," said Melville, who recalled the weary waiting of a few nights before.

"I won't be gone long, but no matter how long it is, remember to wait till I join you. I don't want to be compelled to hunt you up after I get back."

"We'll be here," said Whitney in his decisive way.

There was no call for Zigzag to consume the time taken on his former reconnaissance, and he did not do so.

Being assured that there was no fierce dog to be feared, and that the only sentinel on duty was at the mouth of the lane, he moved with a precision and certainty altogether lacking in the first instance.

He quickly located the party in the same room they were seated on the former occasion. As then, the blinds were hermetically sealed, so that he could not catch even an infinitesimal glimpse of the interior.

Furthermore, the party were conversing in such low tones that he failed to identify a single expression, though he was confident that he recognized the voices.

He had learned enough; the parties whom he was seeking were in the rear room of Oak Hall, and there was no call for the least delay in moving against them.

Five minutes later, Zigzag had rejoined his friends on the other side of the building and explained the situation.

It was not necessary to lay out any new plan of campaign, for, as we have said, that had been fully decided upon before.

They expected to find the group just as they had found them, and what they now did was in accordance with what was arranged while on the road from the bridge, where the valise had been hidden, to Oak Hall.

Zigzag walked softly in front, with Whitney close behind him, and Fred Melville bringing up the rear.

Each had a couple of revolvers, and their movements were as stealthy as that of so many red Indians.

The same bent wire that had served him so well before was applied by Zigzag, who took but a half minute to throw back the night-latch and to open the front hall door.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that his friends were at his heels.

The door was closed behind them, and they stood within the hall of the gloomy old building.

The next instant they advanced on tip-toe to the room at the rear, where the burglars were dividing their ill-gotten plunder.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OVERSIGHT.

ZIGZAG the detective was yet a dozen paces from the room which he meant to enter, when he saw the door open a couple of inches and then instantly close again.

Someone had peered for a second through the crevice at the intruders and then shut and fastened the door like a flash.

"They have seen us!" whispered Zigzag; "follow me!"

He bounded forward like a panther and seized the knob. As he expected, it refused to open; it was locked from within.

He was used to such obstructions, and he threw his weight against it with a power that it seemed must drive his muscular shoulder clean through the panel.

Whitney added his efforts, and Melville would have done the same had there been room to apply his strength.

The combined power of the officers quickly prevailed, and the door was carried off its hinges, falling flat inside the apartment with a crash.

The interior was dark, except from the faint light that penetrated from the main hall.

"Lookout!" said Zigzag to his friends, as he ducked his head expecting a fusillade from the revolvers of the gang.

But the splendid officer showed his pluck, despite his fearful peril, by leaping into the center of the room and calling in a determined voice:

"Surrender every one of you! Up with your hands!"

There was something almost ludicrous in the sight of a single man bounding among several desperate criminals with this command on his lips:

"By the great Cæsar!" exclaimed Whitney, who was right behind him; "what trick is this, Zig? There's no one here!"

As coolly as if standing in his own office in the city of New York, Zigzag drew a rubber safe from his pocket, extracted a match and scraped it along the bottom of the little box. As the light burned, he held it above his head and looked around the room.

He and his two friends were the only ones in sight.

The recently extinguished lamp was still smoking and it required some dextrous work to remove the hot chimney without scorching his fingers. He quickly succeeded and the three then saw everything clearly.

"They have escaped!" exclaimed Whitney. "They must have gone out the window," added Melville.

The next moment, however, showed them that such could not be the case, for the two windows were not only closed, but the heavy fastenings of the sashes were in place—an impossibility had the windows been used as a means of exit.

The only door connecting with the room was that by which the intruders had entered.

Zigzag glanced up at the ceiling. It was smooth and without a line indicating the door.

"Here it is," he added the next minute.

He pointed to the floor, which was without carpet or matting.

A black line in the shape of a square about a yard wide was easily traced by the eye.

Near one side of the space thus marked, was an iron ring, by which the trap-door could be raised and lowered. It fitted in place with exquisite nicety.

When discovered, Zigzag was standing almost over the middle and close to the table holding the refreshments of the company.

Stooping down, he ran his middle finger through the ring and raised the trap-door.

Before it was brought half-way up, two pistols were discharged from below, and the bullets missed the head and shoulders of the officer by the narrowest chance conceivable.

He dropped the trap-door as though it had become red-hot.

"Stay there!" he muttered; "we can stand it as long as you!"

"Hello! here comes somebody," said Whitney, as all heard the front door open.

"I'll attend to him," replied Zigzag. "Keep out of sight in the room here, till I call for you."

The detective was just in time to confront the new arrival, as he was moving along the hall.

It was Ben Jones, white and scared.

"What's the matter, Buck?" he asked.

"Didn't I tell you to stay where you were till I sent for you?" angrily demanded the supposed Buckholtz.

"Yes; but I didn't like the looks of things—"

Jones stopped short. The man before him stood so that the glare of the hall lamp shone full in his face. It was the first time the farmer had had a fair look at the countenance of the man whom he supposed to be his friend.

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Ben, starting back. "I thought you was Buckholtz! Who are you?"

"Your master," replied the detective, shoving the muzzle of his revolver almost against his nose, "and for two cents I'd blow the top of your head off!"

The fellow was so terrified that he seemed on the point of falling to the floor in a dead collapse.

"Don't shoot—don't shoot!" he wailed. "I won't hurt you!"

"There's only one way to save your life," said Zigzag, in his most terrible manner, seeing how completely the fellow was cowed; "will you do it?"

"I'll do anything you want me to. Oh, what will become of my family?"

"You ought to have thought of that before you went in with this gang; but it isn't too late now to save your carcass."

"Oh, please tell me what you want me to do—please tell me and I will do it."

"Those four men that were in there a few minutes ago," said the detective, lowering his pistol and indicating the room by a jerk of his head, "have gone down the trap-door and are in the pit below."

"Yes—yes—yes."

"You must help get them out."

"I'll do it—I'll do it—only show me the way."

"Come on."

The next minute the two entered the apartment where Fred Melville and Cutt Whitney in no little excitement were awaiting them.

The look that passed between the detective and Ben Jones, when the two recognized each other brought a smile to the face of Zigzag, who understood all the circumstances.

But neither spoke.

"Is there any way of fastening down this door?" asked Zigzag, of the terrified farmer.

"Only by settin' on it."

"Well, sit there then."

Ben Jones stepped briskly forward and took his seat on the trap-door.

"They're fast now," he said, with a ghastly grin, "as much as if an elephant was standin' in my place."

It looked as if in one sense the task of the detectives and Fred Melville was finished or rather had come to a standstill; for the burglars being imprisoned, had only to be held where they were until starved into submission.

The most desperate set of men caught at such

frightful disadvantage as they, would really be at the mercy of a single officer, who, standing back in the apartment could pick them off as fast as they showed their heads at the opening, provided permission was given them thus to show their heads.

"Mr. Jones," said Zigzag, as he took his seat; "have you ever been down through that door?"

"Never in all my life."

"You don't know how big the apartment down there is?"

"I have no idea."

"If we three should leave you here, will you keep it fastened down till we come back again?"

"I'll do so if I get shot for it."

"You'll get shot if you don't do as I tell you."

All the same, however, Zigzag had no intention of putting so much responsibility on the shoulders of their new recruit.

"I want to ask you another question," continued the detective in his most impressive manner, "and you know how important it is for you to speak the truth."

"I'll do it—you can depend onto that, dead sure."

"Where's the money those scamps stole from the Asheville Bank last week?"

"My good gracious! do you s'pose they'd let me know; I haven't any more idee than you have."

It could scarcely be doubted that Ben Jones was telling only simple facts.

"No, I know that you are truthful, for it wouldn't do for you to try to deceive me."

At this moment, Fred Melville, who had been moving restlessly about the apartment, stepped up to Zigzag and asked in an undertone:

"You know how anxious I am to get away for awhile; it doesn't look as if there is anything for me to do here; can you spare me?"

"By all means, go at once."

"Thank you," was the fervent response of the young man, who quickly passed out of the apartment into the hall and then through the outer door.

Along the narrow, darkened lane he ran as if on the wings of the wind.

Let the others hunt for the stolen money and the guilty parties who stole it; he felt that he had a task on hand of a thousand-fold more importance.

Meanwhile, Zigzag and Whitney found their job anything but pleasant. While impelled by the fiercest excitement, they had suddenly come to a halt, and it looked as if they might be compelled to stay where they were for hours if not for days.

It would have been the height of foolhardiness for them to venture into the dark pit underneath Oak Hall, where no doubt the desperate men would be glad to welcome them with a volley that would riddle both.

There really seemed but the one thing to do—send for help and smoke them out.

"Wal, I'll be consarned!" suddenly exclaimed Ben Jones, who was beginning to recover something of his self-possession; "if I didn't forgit one thing."

"What's that?"

"You must excoos me, for I forgot as sure as a gun."

"Forgot what?" demanded the half-angered Zigzag, rightly suspecting that the other had something important to tell.

"Why, this ain't a room exactly that's under the house, but a sort of passage-way that leads out toward the lake. I reckon it was built so that if any of 'em ever got cornered here in the house they could scoot out to the water and slip off that way. Sorry I forgot to tell you about it afore, but I reckon them fellers are gonel"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"AT LAST! AT LAST!"

WHEN Aaron Buckholtz assured his friend, Asaph Ashman, in the city of New York, that, although the fair prisoner, Miss Gladys Linden, had escaped from Oak Hall, she was still as safe and as much in their power as ever, he spoke the truth.

On that fearful night, when she fled from the building as from the presence of the plague itself, she expected to spend the remaining hours of darkness in the gloomy woods that were so conveniently at hand.

But she could not do that after all. There was something in the dense gloom, the sighing night wind and the ghostly figures that seemed to be flitting all about her that would not allow her to remain still.

She stopped several times, but, impelled by her terror, she pushed on as a person will do when under the influence of a panic.

She followed no defined course, but kept on—on—on until unexpectedly to herself she emerged into the open fields again.

Pausing for a moment, she caught the glimmer of a light but a short distance away.

"They must be friends," she said to herself, "for the only enemies I have in the world are in Oak Hall."

The distressed lady was warranted in believing that no one would offer her anything but kindness and she made her way without hesitation to the dwelling. She did not remember ever to have seen the place before, but, she knocked

loudly at the door and begged the privilege of staying all night.

Her summons was answered by a kind looking lady who hastened to give her the succor she needed. She said that her husband was away but she was in momentary expectation of his return.

Gladys was so wearied that she could hardly stand, and, despite her fright, she was scarcely in the bed to which the good hearted hostess helped place her, when she sunk into a deep sleep that last d far into the next day.

A strange fate had led the footsteps of the wanderer to the home of Ben Jones, who suspected her identity the moment he heard the facts from his wife. He had seen the popular Miss Linden so often in Asheville, that a stolen peep through the door confirmed his suspicion, and he hurried off to Oak Hall, with the interesting news to Buckholtz.

This, it will be borne in mind, was on the Saturday succeeding the bank robbery and abduction.

Buckholtz was in favor of bringing the lady back to Oak Hall and probably would have done so, had he not learned shortly after that she was quite ill from her sufferings and exposure. Indeed, during the day, she became so flighty as to require constant attendance and care.

A consultation of several of the gang led to the decision that under the circumstances it was better to keep the lady where she was. None of her friends would dream of looking there for her and Ben Jones with the help of his wife could easily prevent any one learning her whereabouts.

The fact of the lady's illness changed the current of incidents that had been provided for. If she were taken back to Oak Hall, the probabilities were that the transfer would be injurious, if not fatal to her. Besides, she required some lady attendant, and, since the wife of Ben Jones was the only one to whom the criminals dare apply, the same attention would be given the patient where she was, without the additional risk of changing her tarrying-place.

Still further, the fact must not be lost sight of that the scheme for the ransoming of Miss Gladys had already taken such definite form that it was not believed it would be necessary to detain her beyond a day or two more at the furthest.

Ben Jones was so alarmed by the effect of the threatened complication upon him that he insisted upon calling a physician at once. If Miss Linden should die in his house, he verily believed he would be hanged for participation in her death.

But his wife assured him that the lady's illness was not serious, and succeeded in persuading him to wait until Sunday. On the afternoon of that day she was so much better that the farmer was convinced that she was out of all danger.

On Monday Miss Linden was entirely herself, and insisted upon asking some exceedingly troublesome questions.

She was made with some difficulty to believe the story that had been prepared for her ears.

It was Saturday instead of Sunday, and as soon as she was a little stronger she would be taken to her home in Asheville. Her friends there had been acquainted with her experience, and had called to see her, among them her uncle, Tudor Carew, and Fred Melville. Since the doctor had given orders for her not to be disturbed, and she was asleep at the time, they merely looked into the room at her and took their departure, promising to call the next day.

On Monday, Gladys was entirely recovered. She insisted upon being taken home at once, but Mrs. Jones made the good plea that she was entirely alone in the house and could not go away without leaving some one to look after it.

Her husband was absent, the two little boys of whom he had told Mr. Cutt Whitney during their confidential chat in Asheville being among the remote possibilities of the future. It seemed reasonable to expect her own friends to take her home, and when Monday night closed in without any sign of them, poor Gladys was almost heart-broken.

She spent the evening in writing letters to her uncle and aunt, to her dear friends Amy and Ada Walsingham of Ravenswood, and last of all to Fred Melville, Mr. Jones promising to have them forwarded to Asheville at the earliest moment.

It was the failure to see or hear from her beloved that crushed the lady. He had been the one prominent figure in all the wild fancies that racked her brain in her moments of delirium, and she was sure that he would lose no time in hastening to her.

Little comfort was there in the story that he had been there and had looked upon her unconscious face. She had not seen him; she had not felt the warm pressure of his hand, nor the fervent touch of his lips against her own, nor the sweet, enchanting words that only he knew how to whisper in her ear.

"Why does he not come?"

This was the question which she asked herself so many times and over which she worried and distressed herself so much that she was in danger of throwing herself into a fever again.

It required the sternest manner of Mrs. Jones

to prevent her setting out for home after Monday night had closed in.

But for the positive promise that she should see her friends on the morrow, she would have made the start even on foot.

"I can't stand this any longer," said the discouraged Mrs. Jones to her equally disgusted husband; "if the folks down at Oak Hall want to hold her a prisoner, why don't they come and take her away?"

"I ain't very much in love with the business myself," replied Ben, "and I give 'em to understand that this ain't a part of the contract."

"What do they mean to do to-morrow?"

"Why, they'll send the same carriage and make her believe they're goin' to take her home, but will run her back into the room that she slipped out of jes' 'cause that old Carew was fool enough to leave the door unlocked behind him."

"Do you think they can fool her a second time? Not much, they can't," said the lady, who had formed a highly favorable opinion of the ability and will of the handsome young lady under her care.

"They'll have hard work I know, but, from what I've heerd, the boys expect to send her home to-morrow just as she has been promised. The other part of the business is to be fixed to-night, so they won't have any more use for her arter to-morrer mornin'."

"For gracious sake I hope it will be so, for this is just wearing me out."

Gladys was so confident that her friends would come for her that evening that she refused to retire. She sat in the little parlor of Ben Jones's house, silent and thoughtful, nervous and expectant and at times tearful and depressed.

Business called Ben away, as the reader has learned long since, and when he came home late at night, from his fruitless tramp after the valise and the money under the bridge, she was rocking back and forth while his wife was dozing on another chair.

Ben glanced at the two without speaking, then went up stairs to his own apartment.

"If they want to set up all night I don't care; there's nothin' mean about me and I won't binder 'em."

The sight of the signal-lantern from Oak Hall brought Ben down again, and he slipped out without being noticed by the dozing couple.

Gladys had kept her senses much better than her attendant, but she now sunk into a slumber which was marked by such troublous dreams that it brought no refreshment to her.

She saw her lover hurrying along a dark, lonely road, with arms outstretched to clasp her, while some frightful ogre held her back. He called to her, and, when she strove to answer, she could not speak above a whisper. She struggled and toiled and finally broke away and bounded to her feet.

She stared about her in the dimly lit room before she could realize where she was.

She saw that Mrs. Jones was sound asleep, for she breathed heavily with her head far over the back of her chair and did not move.

"Fred is searching for me, I know," gasped Gladys, drawing her shawl closely about her; "he is flying over the road, and I must, I will meet him."

She rose noiselessly to her feet and opened the door. A furtive glance to the rear showed that Mrs. Jones was still unconscious.

The next minute, Gladys Linden was on the public highway, speeding in the direction of Asheville.

Suddenly, the figure of a man loomed to view in the moonlight, walking rapidly toward her.

At any other time, she would have fled; now she hastened toward him with flying feet and outstretched arms.

"Fred, is it you? Yes—it is you—at last! at last!"

"Gladys!—my own—my love!—my life!—God be praised!"

And Fred Melville flung his arms around the willowy, yielding form and held her close and tight against his heart of hearts.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"THE GAME IS UP!"

ZIGZAG, the detective, was so infuriated at hearing Ben Jones's announcement that the trap-door in Oak Hall led to an underground passage, that he was half-tempted to wing him with his revolver.

While the two officers were confident that the birds had been caged, they had been quietly making their way through the passage to the outer air and in all probability were at that moment far away.

But it was apparent to both Zigzag and Whitney that the farmer, in his panic, had actually forgotten that highly important piece of information.

"Stay here and watch this passage!" thundered Zigzag; "if you allow them to get back through this door, you are a dead man."

"My gracious! you needn't be afeerd of me doin' that," faltered Ben, pressing down with all his might on the door and wishing that it could have been his privilege at that moment to weigh a ton.

"Tell us where the mouth of this infernal tunnel is," commanded the officer, stopping short as he and Whitney were about to dash out of the door.

"Go straight toward the lake; there's a clump of bushes that you'll see leanin' over the water; they hide the opening that leads from the room down-stairs; if you hurry I think you'll git there ahead of 'em, for it's slow work creepin' through the tunnel."

"There's precious little chance of our reaching the outlet first," growled Whitney, placing his hand on the knob of the door.

"Mr. Whitney," said Zigzag, sharply, "you will stay outside by the door, where you can hear everything that takes place in this room. If this fellow attempts any game, or moves from his position over the trap-door, you know what to do."

"There will be no trifling," replied Whitney, placing his hand on the handle of his revolver at his hip.

Ben Jones, if possible, turned a shade paler, and stammered:

"My gracious! you needn't be afraid of me!"

In uttering this single order to his companion, Zigzag accompanied it with a wink of the eye. Cutt "caught on" at once; it was a little game of bluff which accomplished its purpose.

In all probability, the farmer was in earnest, but it was well to let him believe he was distrusted. Zigzag had no intention of leaving his ally as a guard, while he went after the others.

Whitney led the way out into the hall, with Zigzag at his heels, and the next instant they left the house by the front door.

"It's a pity we let Melville go," said the former.

"He was so anxious to see the young lady that he couldn't be restrained any longer. Now, Cutt, we must move lively; see that your pistols and handcuffs are ready."

"They are; lead the way."

At the risk of colliding with some of the tree-trunks where the shadows were so dense, they broke into a trot which became a run, as they emerged from the grove surrounding Oak Hall, and sped across the open field toward the gleaming surface of the pond, which was not far away.

Fortune, which seemed to frown upon the brave officers, now turned in their favor.

They had not gone far, before they caught sight of the clump of bushes on the margin of the water.

"That must be the spot," whispered Whitney increasing his pace, so that he was slightly in the lead.

The next minute they halted beside the clump of undergrowth, the fine physical condition of both showing itself in the fact that there was scarcely a perceptible increase in their respiration.

"I'm afraid we are too late," muttered Zigzag, who had drawn his pistol.

"Sh! there is some one!"

Both crouched down beside the bushes, like a couple of wild beasts about to spring upon their prey.

The figures of two men crept into view at that moment, in a stooping position on the other side of the screen.

"I guess we give 'em the slip after all," said one with a savage oath.

"It was a close call," remarked the other, "and the rest of the boys mustn't lose any time."

Zigzag touched the arm of Whitney and whispered:

"Now!"

As if propelled by a powerful spring-board, the two officers seemed to bound directly over the top of the bushes, and landing on the amazed knaves struck each a blow on the head with the butts of their revolvers.

The crack meant "business" of the most serious kind, and the couple went over as senseless as if their lives were knocked from their bodies.

A dull click followed, and in an instant the wrists of the two were securely fastened by patent handcuffs. Messrs. Matt Hardy and Jack Tovey were as completely *hors du combat*, as though they had been tried, sentenced and locked up in the penitentiary.

Zigzag and Whitney each seized his man by the shoulders and dragged him back behind the bushes where they would not attract the notice of any others emerging therefrom.

They were not a moment too soon.

"Hello!" called some one from the dark throat of the tunnel, "is it all right there?"

"Yes," replied Zigzag, disguising his voice as well as he could; "hurry up!"

"We're lucky, after all; I don't want to run another such chance as that; it all comes—"

Before Mr. Aaron Buckholtz could complete the sentence, he went backward a dozen feet, driven by the fist of Cutt Whitney, who delivered the blow for all he was worth.

That which followed was not without its humorous feature.

With the same astonishing dexterity the handcuffs were clicked fast around the wrists of the miscreant, before he could rally from

the daze into which he was thrown by the crushing blow.

But directly behind Buckholtz was Jud Dalrymple, who saw that something was wrong.

He was in the act of emerging from the mouth of the tunnel, when he whirled about and entered it again to escape the officers whose identity he knew from their actions.

Zigzag caught sight of him and broke the silence that had marked the lively scuffling by a sharp command:

"Halt! the game is up!"

But Jud was too terrified to halt. He was resolved to secure the refuge of the tunnel, even if it was only for a brief while.

In his effort to get back, he stumbled forward on his hands and knees. Without waiting to rise, he began furiously crawling into the opening.

"Halt! I tell you, or I'll fire!"

Zigzag did not content himself with discharging his revolver over the head of the panic-stricken fellow, but shoving his weapon back in his pocket, he seized one of the ankles of Dalrymple, and, bracing himself, tugged with might and main to draw him from the hole.

But Dalrymple had already secured a good hold with his hands, and the strength of one man was insufficient to bring him forth. He pulled like a person who knew his life was at stake, and to add to the interest of the occasion, began yelling like a wild Indian.

Not only that, but a mule could not have exercised his leg with more ardor than did Dalrymple use his free one. Clinging fast with both hands to the sides of the entrance, he kicked furiously, pulled savagely and shouted vociferously.

"Cutt!" called Zigzag, shaking with laughter, "as soon as you are through with that chap, help me here. This is the toughest customer of them all."

Whitney ran to the assistance of his friend, and after receiving some sharp kicks about the hands and arms, managed to get hold of the other leg, that was beating the air like a drumstick.

Both feet of Dalrymple were now in the grasp of his enemies, and though he tried desperately to kick himself free, he could not. He, therefore, pulled the harder with his two hands, and it looked for a moment as if he would draw the two officers into the tunnel after him.

But the heaviest artillery was on the other side. Zigzag and Whitney suppressed their mirth, secured a brace for their feet, and, compressing their lips, drew back with might and main.

"Suppose we pull his legs off?" whispered Whitney, with mock alarm.

The suggestion set Zigzag laughing to that extent that he lost his hold and received a kick on the shoulder which flung him upon his back.

Then Whitney laughed, and only by the narrowest possible chance prevented Judson Dalrymple from getting off altogether. He redoubled his efforts and his outcries were loud enough to be heard a mile away.

But the kick which Zigzag received sobered him, and springing to his feet, he again seized the recalcitrant limb of Dalrymple, who the next moment was drawn yelling into the moonlight, where the last pair of handcuffs at the command of the officers were snapped about his wrists.

"There's one left," said Whitney, looking around at the four men whom they had secured with such cleverness.

"Yes, and there's no likelihood that he will follow the others out of the tunnel; the yelping of this coward has given him the alarm if nothing else has and he will not show himself."

"It's only a question of time, for he is caged."

"Yes, and won't it make a sensation when the truth leaks out to-morrow? But these scamps are coming to their senses and we shall have a serenade, when the four find they have fallen into the clutches of two officers of the law. Hello! What does that mean?"

The exclamation was caused by the sudden discovery that there were new arrivals on the scene.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

By one of those rare good freaks of fortune which occasionally come to us in this world, a party of young men returning from a social gathering were passing along the public highway near Oak Hall at the time of the detective's lively tussle with the bank burglars.

There were three stalwart youths, who were riding in an open wagon and verifying by the tardiness of their progress the truth of the rollicking song they were chanting, in which they gave it as their conviction that they would not go home till morning.

Full of animal life and spirits, these likely young fellows were always delighted at the prospect of a lark. The sound of pistol-firing and the shouts of some one who seemed to have his head in a barrel, caused them to draw their horse to one side, and clambering over the fence, they ran in the direction of the rumpus, eager to take a hand in the same.

The detectives were delighted to see them, and quickly explained how they could make ten dollars apiece by driving back to Asheville with the four men as passengers.

Since it was impossible that one vehicle should contain the whole party or one horse draw them all, it was arranged that the four prisoners should ride while one of the young men drove, the rest (with an exception to be named immediately) walking at the side of the team.

Of course there were all kinds of ranting, threats and protests on the part of the criminals, but it did them no good. The young farmers' sons were so pleased over the prospect of making ten dollars apiece in addition to the prospect of being mentioned in complimentary terms in the *Asheville Weekly Banner*, that they would have been willing to carry the prisoners on their backs the entire distance.

As it was, they asked the privilege of "punching the heads" of the captives on general principles, just to show their good will toward the gentlemen that had employed them.

A brief while after the wholesale capture, the strange procession started back to Asheville, with two of the young men and Cutt Whitney acting as an escort.

They reached town in the small hours of the morning and safely delivered the prisoners to the authorities, who placed them in secure confinement.

Zigzag did not go with the company but left the management of it to Cutt Whitney, while he remained behind.

It will be borne in mind that the fifth and most important member of the gang had not yet been taken. Zigzag intended to make sure of him.

After seeing Whitney and the rest safely off, he hurried back to Oak Hall, plunging in through the door in such haste that poor Ben Jones shook like an aspen leaf, when he caught sight of the dreaded officer.

"I—I—declare," he whimpered, "I hain't stirred off this door since you've been gone."

"That's all right; I haven't any fault to find," was the reassuring response; "have you heard or seen anything worth telling?"

"I ain't sure, but a few minutes ago I thought I felt some one pushin' on the under side of the trap-door as though he wanted to come up."

"Did he say anything?"

"If he did I didn't hear him; I made believe I wasn't here and bime-by the pushin' stopped."

"You have done well; now if you will light the lamp in the hall and bring it to me, I'll be obliged."

Ben Jones sprung from his cramped position, dashed out and speedily returned with the lamp ready for use.

"Shall I go with you?" asked the fellow, as the detective raised the door.

"You may if you please; you can carry the light while I follow; don't go too fast."

The two descended into an open space some six feet square, and immediately entered a tunnel-like passage some five feet high, and hardly half as wide. Both were obliged to stoop, but the lamp gave enough illumination to allow them to advance with certainty.

"Walk slowly," said Zigzag, "for I am looking for some stolen property."

He had not told his guide that one of the gang was still in the tunnel, and that he intended to rout him out. Had he done so, Ben Jones would not have been so anxious to lead the way.

The detective had no wish to place the fellow in a position of danger which should have been occupied by himself; but he did not believe that anything was to be feared from the party whom he was so anxious to secure.

"So you didn't have any trouble with 'em?" asked Jones, who, now that he was acting the part of a guide, began to feel free to converse on something like familiar terms with his master.

"None at all; we just piled them into the wagon and sent them to Asheville, where they will soon be juggled."

"My gracious!" exclaimed Jones, "but I thought they would make the worst kind of a fight."

"Men that are caught in crime are cowards."

"Do you think," asked the guide, with some hesitation, looking around over his shoulder, "that it'll go very hard with—me?"

"That depends on what you have done; I don't think you are in as bad a fix as the rest, but no doubt you will have justice done you."

Poor Ben Jones might have answered that that was precisely what he feared.

"The best plea that you can make was that you were victimized by these scamps and made their tool. True, the plea will be a virtual admission that you are a fool, but I am sure you will have no difficulty in convincing the jury of that fact."

"You are very kind, and I hope—"

The parties had passed about two-thirds the way through the tunnel, when Ben Jones emitted a frenzied yell, and leaped backward with such vigor that he almost carried Zigzag off his feet.

"What the mischief is the matter?" demanded the angered officer, rubbing his bruised nose.

"A dead man lays there in the path."

"If he is dead he can't hurt you. Let me

have the light," commanded Zigzag, compelling the fellow to squeeze himself behind him.

Advancing carefully a few steps with the lamp held in front and above his crouching form, Zigzag saw the figure of a man stretched lengthwise along the tunnel.

The first glimpse identified him as Tudor Carew, President of the Asheville Bank, and a brief examination showed that Ben Jones was right in declaring him dead.

With a feeling of awe which Zigzag was unaccustomed to, even in the presence of death, he set the lamp down beside the body of the banker and examined it more closely.

Worst of all Tudor Carew had taken his own life. Finding himself cornered at last, he had sent a bullet into his left breast, aimed with such skill that his death must have been instantaneous.

"I am glad Jones is with me," was the thought of the detective, "otherwise I might have had trouble in proving that I did not fire the shot."

Beside the revolver, with its single empty barrel, was a locked tin box, eight inches wide and more than a foot long. Forcing the lid, the officer saw that it was full of bank-bills and several rolls of gold-pieces.

"That's some of the boodle from the bank," he concluded, raising it from the ground and noticing that it was quite heavy; "here, Jones, take the lamp and lead the way back to the house."

"What-what-are you going to do with him?" stuttered the terrified guide, his hand trembling so that he could hardly hold the lamp that was passed to him.

"Can't you take him over your shoulder and carry him back?"

The man's knees smote each other at the awful suggestion, and the officer hastened to say: "We will leave him where he is for the present; it can do him no harm nor good."

Emerging once more into the small room in Oak Hall from which they had descended, Zigzag deliberately sat down and counted the contents of the tin box which he had captured. He found it a number of thousand dollars short of the sum which had been taken from the vaults of the bank the previous week.

"That represents what he blew in while in New York," was the correct conclusion of the detective, who turned toward the dazed companion and said, "You have a team, haven't you?"

"I have; it's at your service."

"I will go home with you; it is so late that I will stay till morning, and then engage you to take me to Asheville."

Ben Jones was glad to do this for the man who showed his good will by handing him another good-sized greenback from his own private funds.

Reaching the house of the farmer, they found that Fred Melville, after his meeting with Gladys Linden, had returned to the house, where the two, having exchanged their deeply-interesting experiences and repeated their sweet vows, had withdrawn to their rooms for the rest of the night.

The following morning, the lady was taken to her home by the same conveyance that carried her lover and detective Zigzag to the town, which, as may be supposed, was in a ferment of excitement over the astounding news.

We doubt not that the intelligent reader has anticipated, to a large extent, the explanations which it is now our duty to make.

Tudor Carew, Warren Carew his twin brother, and Asaph Ashman were one and the same person. The respected bank president was one of those remarkable individuals who, alas! are too numerous in these days, who led a double, if not a triple, life. It is worth noting, also, that when acting one of these characters, he referred before his associates to each of the others, as though they were really different individuals from his real self.

At home he was a respected business man, and a leading official in the oldest church in Asheville. Not a whisper was ever heard in that sleepy town against his probity and uprightness. Even the wife of his bosom believed as thoroughly in him as did his sweet, pure-minded niece.

All the same, he was an arch hypocrite, whose pretended business trips to Boston were blinds to cover his periodical dissipations in the metropolis, where he was one of the wildest revelers and most abandoned knaves of the great city.

The robbery of the Asheville Bank was his own carefully prepared scheme, carried out with an ingenuity that would have been successful in nine cases out of ten.

The most heinous crime of which he was guilty was his plot to throw suspicion upon Fred Melville, a young gentleman who never thought or did a wrong act in all his life. But for the skill and ability of the detectives Zigzag and Whitney he might have succeeded in landing him in the penitentiary and disgracing him for life.

But the cipher, which first gave the officers the clew, was in his handwriting. The fact that he opened the ledger of the bank, and that Whitney, in his first essay, looked no further than that page, turned his suspicion of the officer for

a time toward the young man, but it quickly reverted to the guilty party.

The communication received by Tudor Carew demanding fifty thousand dollars for the ransom of his niece, was also his own work, as Whitney discovered while he sat in the banker's own house reading the missive.

The miscreant's dissipation and gambling propensities had led him to appropriate the funds of his niece to an extent that forced him to desperate measures to cover up his speculation. He intended to make it appear that he had paid the large sum named for her freedom, knowing that she would insist upon reimbursing him for the vast outlay, and having been assured by Cutt Whitney (who penetrated his purpose) that public sentiment and law would sustain such a course, his plan had the merit of ingenuity even without a semblance of justice.

As Cutt Whitney stated, in discussing the matter with Zigzag, the banker need not have made such a full pretense of carrying out his part of the agreement, since an empty valise would have answered as well as one with the worthless package of paper; but it may be said that he neglected no precaution.

He foresaw the remote possibility that the bag might fall into unfriendly hands (since he could not be absolutely certain that the detective would keep his promise to abstain from interference) and he fancied that the presence of the package would strengthen his claim that the money had been abstracted by interested parties.

As it afterward appeared, the money taken from the vaults of the bank was carried away in the tin box by Buckholtz and was on the seat with the driver Jud Dalrymple, when he drove Gladys Linden to Oak Hall. It was hidden beneath that building, after he and Carew had abstracted several thousand for their personal use while on their visit to the metropolis. The box remained undisturbed until Monday night, the time appointed for the final division.

Tudor Carew, who was accepted as the leader, had raised the trap-door and was in the act of descending into the small underground apartment, when the officers were heard entering the front of the house.

Instantly the lights were extinguished and the other four men followed Carew into the tunnel. There, unfortunately for them, they halted, undecided what to do.

Hopeful that their retreat would not be discovered, they waited until the officers should depart. The raising of the trap-door by Zigzag convinced them of their error, and pausing long enough to make sure their shots had done no execution, they began groping their way to the opening.

Tudor Carew clung to the box and was at the rear of the party. He was close to Dalrymple, the last one, when his shouts apprised him that the officers were at the opening. He instantly turned about to retrace his steps, and no doubt did push against the trap-door. The weight of Ben Jones prevented its opening, and he turned back once more.

While groping his way to the mouth of the tunnel, he must have awakened to the fact that, as Zigzag expressed it, the "game was up." Realizing that exposure, which was a thousand times worse than death, was inevitable, he had recourse to the expedient of cowards and took his own life.

The sensation produced by the discovery of this man's double life proved a national one and was commented on in the leading papers of the country. The blow almost killed his widow and his niece. Indeed, the former never recovered and quietly passed away within a year of the death of her husband.

It seemed incredible to many that, in addition to the burglary of his bank, he should have planned the abduction of his own niece for the purpose of securing a large sum of money; but there can be no doubt that such was the fact.

It was the characteristic of the man that he should enter the apartment of the young lady in Oak Hall, only slightly changed in appearance and claim to be the twin brother of himself. At that time, he had more frightful schemes concerning her. Buckholtz had promised him a still larger sum if he would secure the hand of the young lady for him, and Carew promised to do it. He opened the way during the first interview, by appealing to her affection for him, but he was checked by her evident devotion to her lover, and he passed out of the room to tell Buckholtz that he did not believe it possible to carry out that part of their wicked programme.

Buckholtz, much against his will, was forced to agree with him, at that interview, although he did not entirely relinquish hope. The exigencies of the situation resulting from the bank burglary, however, forced him to defer several important steps which he had in mind. The forgetfulness of Carew in leaving the door of her room unsecured, by which she escaped, complicated matters still further. But she was known to be at Ben Jones's house, and after securing his share of the spoils, Buckholtz determined on heroic measures.

But Providence interfered and the dreadful schemes came to naught.

All four of the captured bank burglars re-

ceived long terms in the Penitentiary and Cutt Whitney and Zigzag departed for new fields of labor. Ben Jones, through their good offices, escaped punishment, since it was quite evident that he was only a tool in the hands of cunning and designing men; but the fright which he received resulted in his becoming so upright in his demeanor forever afterward that it may be said he leaned backward.

Although Tudor Carew had made serious inroads on the fortune of Gladys Linden, there was still a goodly sum left, and when, a few months later, she became the bride of Fred Melville, there was none in all Asheville who had a more queenly dower than she.

The happy Fred might have abandoned hard work for the rest of his life; but he was a sensible youth, and applied himself with such diligence that, two years later, he became cashier of the bank, and at the very last meeting of the directors he was elected to the honorable position of head of the institution whose capital at the same meeting was increased to one million dollars.

And so, all's well that ends well.

THE END.

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